

TIME WARP 6/7

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WARP TIME

Welcome to the latest issue of TIME WARP. It's been a long time between issues, but I think that, once you examine the contents of this issue, you'll agree that the wait was worthwhile. I am probably biased and prejudiced, but I honestly think that this is the best issue of TIME WARP yet, and one of the most diversified.

But we can discuss the contents of this issue later. First, some necessary apologies--and some very necessary thanks.

Apologies, first, to Vida Hull, who drew the excellent Spock portrait gracing the front cover of TIME WARP 5. Because I was looking for a 'mirror effect' to complement the "Mirror Worlds" theme of the last issue, I chose to print Vida's art through a heavy screen, thinking that this would give the impression of a mirrored reflection. Unfortunately, I think that the final result was too washed-out, and did not do full justice to Vida's original portrait. For this, I apologize.

I also apologize to Vida for the delay in returning her work. After losing her address, and never receiving her first change of address, I finally brought the original artwork to World Con, to return it to her in person, only to miss making contact with her despite leaving a message for her at the Art Show. *sigh* And now I've gone and lost Vida's new change of address. If anyone has her current address, would they please pass it on to me so I can return her artwork?

An apology is also owed to Pat Munson-Siter, author of "Deep the Gathering Gloom." After editing the story, I mailed it on to Pat for any final changes she might care to make. The story was returned to me as undeliverable. Rather than pull the story, I decided to print the copy I had at hand. If anyone has Pat's current address, would they please pass it on?

My everlasting thanks go to Carol Walske and Fern Marder. Their listing on the contents page as "editorial staff" does not begin to indicate just how great a debt is owed them. No job has been too much for them, no cries for help have gone unanswered by them. Quite simply, there would not have been a TIME WARP 6/7--at least, not in this form and not for this Media*West Con--without their unstinting efforts. This zine is dedicated to them with every thanks and with the deepest, most humble appreciation. Mine may have been the dream originally, but they took on the burden of making that dream a reality--and I thank them. Carol, Fern, believe me--there are no words to express the depth of my gratitude. What can I say but thank you, both of you.

Thanks are also extended to all the wonderful artists and authors whose creative endeavors are appearing in this issue. All too frequently I had

them battling seemingly insurmountable odds, giving them impossible deadlines to meet. Yet time after time, these deadlines were met.

Thank you, all of you.

And you, the reader. Thank you. Thank you for making TIME WARP the success it is, thank you for your critiques and LOCs, thank you for your continued patronage. It is your pleasure, your appreciation, your loyalty that makes the hard work of putting out a zine like TIME WARP all worthwhile.

Again, thank you, and I hope you will enjoy this latest issue. Just what's in store for you? Well...

If you remember, last issue there was this story contest, of sorts. Luke and Leia were trying to convince Han to disguise himself as a monk, and he was--to say the least--resisting the idea. The story lead-in provided by the 'contest' was wide open--no information was given about the task Luke and Leia had in mind for Han, no information was given about Han's prior relationship (if any) with an unnamed order of monks, no information was given about why Han resisted wearing the habit of a monk.

Well, that story lead-in served as the 'inspiration' for quite a number of stories in this issue. In fact, this is almost the "Han-as-a-monk" issue of TIME WARP. But that's not all...

"In Durance Vile: A Reprehensible Tale" is another of Susan Matthews' delightful stories about Thera, the pantherix Temple dancer. Graced with superb Martynn illos, this tale (tail?) of the lovely catdancer involves a daring prison rescue, a most unusual form of...torture, and Raker-the-Blade, one of the most delightful created characters since Thera herself. Although the Thera stories can be fit into mainline SWARS, I think Susan thinks of them as belonging to an alternate timeline.

"Season of Retreat," by Jacqueline Taero, is very short, and very bitter-sweet. It is one of those tales that exists in a rather strange, nebulous world--it is a tale that, depending on your 'point of view,' may be an alternate ending to RETURN OF THE JEDI or, conversely, a sequel thereto. Which? I don't know. Why don't you decide?

Maggie Nowakowska's "Two's Company, Three's a Corellian" is the official sequel--many years later, of course!--to "A Tale of Two Lukes," printed in TIME WARP 3. It is a "Thousand Worlds" story and is, therefore, an alternate timeline based on A NEW HOPE alone.

"Haljax, or, The Women of Ibm," by Barbara Wenk, is a delightful spoof of SF stories and the Greek plays. Test your knowledge of SF by seeing just how many references you can find in the story.

Carol Walske's "Winner Takes All" is a mainline story, an 'interquel' taking place between A NEW HOPE and THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK. It gives a very good, very solid reason to explain to all the doubters out there just why Han Solo decided to stay around.

"Prologue to a Quest" may be all too shortly revealed to be an 'alternate' story, but for now, it is a very effective mainline TREK tale that serves as a lovely lead-in to the next movie.

"Sanctuary," by Deborah Laymon and Deborah Goldstein, is an alternate tale. It is part of the "Black Sabre" universe, an alternate timeline that has been spun off of TESB. As such, this tale is a keystone story, one that gives us a great deal of information about the "Black Sabre" universe Han.

"The Return," by Angela-marie Varesano, is an 'alternate JEDI' story, a new and different way to look at the events of JEDI. What if things had turned out this way? What else might not have happened in the STAR WARS universe?

In "Search Party," Roberta Rogow has given us an interesting BUCK ROGERS story--one that, through a very clever ploy, becomes an alternate future to mainline TR--whoops! Can't say anymore, or I'll give the whole plot away. Read the story, and enjoy the intricacies of Roberta's plotting!

Mickey Malkin's "The Pawn" is an 'alternate JEDI' tale. It is short, yet powerful, and should elicit a shudder from most readers. Mickey hastens to assure us that she likes RETURN OF THE JEDI very much. It's just that she couldn't help wondering "what if--"

Pat Munson's "Deep the Gathering Gloom" is part of her Black Jedi universe. This is an alternate timeline universe that was originally spun off of A NEW HOPE. It, along with the Thousand Worlds universe, was one of the very first fan-created SWARS universes. Indeed, a 'Black Jedi' story appeared in MOONBEAMS #3, the very first SWARS fanzine. By the way, Pat was also one of the first writers to hypothesize that Darth Vader was really Luke Skywalker's father. Even before TESB came out, Pat had written a story, "The Fall of Dark," in which Vader and Skywalker Père were the same person.

Pat Nussman's "Prince-in-Waiting" is--uh, alternate? mainline? off the wall? Whatever, don't be mad at Pat. All she did was listen when a certain handsome young Corellian began talking. And can you blame her?

"Legacy," by Bonnie Reitz, is a 'mirror TREK' story, with a difference. The story features War Commander Kirk, an intriguing alternate universe analogue to our own Captain Kirk. As for the universe Bonnie hypothesizes--it is definitely not the universe of "Mirror, Mirror," even though it does hold some similarities with that barbaric world. Read and enjoy meeting characters whom we know so well, and yet are so different.

"Hide and Seek," by Beverly Grant, is a prequel to the events of A NEW HOPE. Bev considers this an alternate timeline story, part of the STAR WARS universe she has been developing over the past few years. Yet there is nothing in the story that negates mainline canon as it stands today. Of course, after the release of "The Clone Wars," this may all change. Meanwhile, Bev gives a logical, workable explanation for some of the developments of RETURN OF THE JEDI.

Within the context of a SWARS story, Sheryl Adsit, in "A Tort et a Travers," introduces us to the stars of British action-adventure show called THE PROFESSIONALS. Meet Bodie and Doyle, two British agents from CI5. THE PROFESSIONALS has not been shown that widely in the States. It should be. It has excellent production values, more than competent acting, decently written scripts, and two very charismatic leading men. While not quite in THE AVENGERS' class, the show is infinitely better than most offerings on American TV. Those of you who can get to Media*West Con might want to keep an eye out. Someone's sure to have tapes of the show there. Enjoy it--and meanwhile, enjoy Sheryl's SWARS/PROFESSIONALS cross-over tale.

I suppose Pat Nussman's "Initiation Rights" could be considered mainline. After all, there's nothing in this story to belie anything canonical. The story could also be considered a response to last issue's 'story contest.' One the other hand (third hand?), the story could be considered an 'alternate universe' tale, taking off from the events in JEDI... Tell you what. You decide.

"H is for Hazardman, Not Hellion" is the third Hazardman story written and illustrated by Patrick O'Neill. A straight SF/action-adventure tale in the tradition of Batman, the Shadow, and all the other pulp and comic heroes, Hazardman (Haz, to his friends) is a welcome addition of the pages of TIME WARP.

Marcia Brin's "For Auld Lang Syne" and its companion poem, "A Cup of Kindness," belong to an alternate timeline that has, as its jump-off point, the events of TESB.

"SMOTU" is a--satire? sequel to RETURN OF THE JEDI? alternate timeline story? Again, this is an instance when you, the reader, must be the final arbiter.

Jean Stevenson's "Entr'acte," a delicate, romantic probing of the developing Han/Leia relationship, is also a very believable 'interquel' story set in the period between the end of A NEW HOPE and the beginning of THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK. Though the story may belong solely to Jean's created universe, there is certainly nothing there to negate established canon.

In addition to the above, other stories and poems in this issue explore such universes as that of BLADE RUNNER, MAN FROM ATLANTIS, RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, etc. No slight is intended on any work not mentioned above. There simply is not room to go into any more detail in this editorial.

Anne Elizabeth Zeek



IN DURANCE VILE

A REPREHENSIBLE TALE

Susan R. MATTHEWS

Considering the fact that she had suddenly found herself a fugitive, a rebel sympathizer or worse, not to mention a shameless, wanton woman, Thera thought she had adjusted remarkably well.

The Alderaani woman Organa was as good as Han Solo's word, or better. Han had promised her the payment of her contract and a safe haven. Organa redeemed Thera's contract with Thera's Temple, redeeming Thera's honor by that same action, and provided Thera with a 'cover' (Thera understood that to be the jargon) with sufficient funds to make Thera's life comfortable, on top of it. She did not become rich by the exchange of her temple-dancing for this life of political intrigue, but she didn't lose more than her probity in the eyes of the law.

She found she did not miss it much.

She'd never been criminally minded, no--but it hadn't been for reason of commitment to the Empire, or respect for Imperial law. She had lived a moral, lawful life out of respect for herself. Her life was no less moral now for its lawlessness, and her lawlessness--here outlaw status--was not a result of any crime on her part. As a result of these considerations Thera--though a certain apprehension did intrude upon her peace of mind, from time to time--felt neither guilt-ridden, socially undesirable, nor even malevolent.

The Alliance, in the person of the diminutive rebel leader from Alderaan, had set Thera down on the planet Shimiro, where the dominant species was feline--more feline than an Althea pantherix like Thera, less feline than Thera's now-lost friend, the Heildie cattan Sheali. Thera did not feel as out of place on Shimiro as she might have elsewhere.

Local operatives placed her as an exotic dancer in a fairly respectable entertainment house of the sort that strictly differentiated between the beings hired to entertain on stage and those hired to entertain in bed. Thera did not mind dancing there. No one mistook her for one of the other entertainers, though one or two local businessmen made delicate and respectful inquiries about things. She didn't really mind--the inquiries, they were so

politely tendered, and one or two of her admirers were handsome indeed. She didn't accept any offers, true, but she didn't mind them.

In addition to this she modeled for art students at a regional education center. So far they had not asked her to pose less than dressed, or in what Thera considered any indecent manner; she supposed that to the local inhabitants her appearance itself was sufficiently exotic to sustain interest.

The dilapidated old mercenary had not been part of her 'bargain.'

He simply turned up one morning, snarling half-asleep at her into his whiskers as she opened her cottage-door and nearly tripped over him. She started back on her threshold, astonished, nearly dropping the packet she was carrying with her lunch.

"Watch where tha's going, ignorant girl!" he said--more or less. His accent was thick to Thera's ear, and she just looked at him where he lay across her doorstep for a long moment before pointing out to him the absurdity of his admonition.

The woven straw sandals on his furry feet looked more worn than she had seen worn ever, though sandals were inexpensive; the slit-sleeved robe that served certain classes of the Yanjosi natives of Shimiro for dress was so frayed and faded that the perhaps once-blue background was almost indistinguishable from the perhaps once-yellow 'splendor-flower' pattern.

But one of his paws was pushed through the overlapping v-shaped throat of his wrapped robe where his arms were folded against his chest to keep a secure hold on the hilt of his double-paw sword: this Yanjosi was a fighting man, if one who had fallen on hard times.

Perhaps he was freelance; there seemed to be none of the ritual facial scarring that would have identified him as a man once sworn to a now-dead warlord, no torn left ear where a ring of office had

once been proudly worn. His right ear was dreadfully tattered and torn, and his forearm seemed badly scarred--a mercenary, then.

"You are on my step," Thera told him, as well as she could manage in his dialect. "Please let me step down."

And he seemed to be surprised; he looked all about him with an expression of sudden awareness and astonishment. "Why, you are correct. Your pardon, gentle lady. Give an old man some money, eh?" He smiled up at her in what he apparently intended to be an ingratiating manner. Unfortunately, his 'smile' looked to Thera very much like one of Sheali's very angry faces, and she was not at all reassured by the ferocity of his needle-toothed grin. She had noticed that more than one of his fangs were broken.

"Why should I give you money?" she asked, and the unexpected reason and logic of his reply caught her sufficiently off guard that she smiled and shrugged and opened her money-pouch for some coins.

"So that I can go and buy some hakut, pretty lady, and warm my tired bones. Your step is very hard, and it was a cold night. Why, it's only your charitable duty to make it up to me."

So Thera gave the derelict some money, and she was a little more generous than she thought proper. She excused the little extra money to herself as a donation toward his next meal and a new pair of straw sandals.

She also pointed out to herself the fact that someone who spent the night on people's doorsteps was more likely to buy extra hakut than new shoes.

Then she forgot about it. Thera lived in what was not the wealthiest neighborhood in Port Daaoud, and--though in this society she ran little risk of being assaulted--encounters with polite beggars were not uncommon. She had even met a polite thief once, a young woman who had approached her as she came home in the early morning and had asked very politely if Thera would object to being robbed. Thera, being new in Port Daaoud, had not quite understood, and nothing had come of it; she had later learned that she was expected to be terrified at her modeling appointment, counted her coins over, shrugged her shoulders over her little adventure, and then didn't think about the derelict Yanjosi until she came home from shopping on one of her free days and found him on her doorstep again.

It was during the cold season, though the street was fairly warm in the afternoon sun. Thera was surprised to see him still dressed for warmer weather, knowing as she did how cold it got at night.

"I have come to express my appreciation," he told her, rising as she came nearer. "You are indeed a very noble lady. You see? I have gotten a new robe."

It didn't look any better to Thera than the old one had, but this was several months after she'd first met him. "You are very welcome," she told him, wondering how to balance her parcels while she

reached for her purse. She assumed he'd come for more charity; she was wrong, in a way.

"A noble lady such as yourself needs a guardian. The streets are full of ruffians, of scum. you are not safe at night. I will be your protector. You may give me an ounce of vac a week for my pay. No, you needn't invite me in, I will sleep in the alley..."

She had been stuck with him ever since.

In time, she found out a little more about him. His name--he told her--was Raker-the-blade, and he claimed--rather extravagantly, in Thera's opinion--to be only thirty. "Gone on forty, though," he said, and Thera privately decided that fifty would be closer to the mark.

He was an itinerant swordsman, a feudal anachronism in this spacer's society--but a great deal of Shimiro society was just that, anachronistic and primitive by, say, Alderaani standards.

He carried his blade with great pride and a certain splendid swaggering arrogance, but he never seemed to so much as draw the weapon from its sheath--which rather disappointed Thera; she had heard many wild stories about Yanjosi swordsmanship. He also carried a blaster, though Thera had never seen him find occasion to use that, either.

He escorted her to her job in the evening, loafed around in the back-street gambling and drinking scalding hot hakut, and then saw her back to her own step. The solemn air of military with which he walked tickled Thera. She amused herself by imagining what a picture they must make, this exiled temple-dancer of a 'noble lady' with her aging, inelegant mercenary of a Yanjosi sword-warrior for her honor-guard.

She was very nervous with him at first. Did he intend to do her harm? Why had he taken it into his probably punchy head that she was a great lady, who needed protection?

She forgot the first question as the weeks went by without his changing his behavior toward her. The second question she despaired of ever resolving. For all she knew he had simply decided to provide himself a regular hand-out, instead of depending on more random begging.

He slept in the alley, sometimes under a wall, any number of places; he patronized the public baths. She once offered to let him set his bed-mat in her hall, somewhere in her small domicile, so she would not feel guilty about him sleeping in the cold; but he declined the offer firmly, politely, with great dignity. She could only guess that he was able to provide everything he needed for himself, except the nominal ounce of vac weekly to buy food and hakut.

And in time she grew less wary of him, and then comfortable with him. He could be a splendid storyteller, when he was in the mood, and if she offered him a jug of hakut he would condescend to come sit in her hallway and tell her whatever the latest gossip from the docking bays it was he had picked up most recently. Sometimes she wondered whether or

not she really needed to know about all the spacer's scandals he came up with. But then she would rationalize it to herself--she could hardly be a danger to anyone, not in her position. No matter how much she knew.

This is where matters stood between Thera and Raker-the-blade the day he came to talk to her about Han Solo and the Wookiee, Chewbacca.

Han Solo lay full-length on the bed-mat he'd been issued and stared at the beams in the ceiling of his prison, disgusted.

He should have remembered when he'd first charted the flight of the Millennium Falcon through Yamanah system.

He should have remembered when he'd promised to pick up a patterned silk bedrobe for Leia from Khosei.

He should have remembered when Chewbacca had suggested they stop over on Shimirow and pick up a cargo of cheap hakut for resale at premium prices elsewhere.

He should have remembered when the Millennium Falcon docked in Port Daaoud under the very shadow of the magnificent relic that was now Kitawah prison.

He hadn't. He hadn't. He hadn't and he hadn't.

He hadn't remembered until the guardsmen came, until the prison official presented herself politely in the public baths. He had forgotten all about it until then. He'd tried to tell Chewie it was all right--inconvenient, but no more--but Chewbacca was still too tender of Han's personal safety. It hadn't been long enough since Chewie and Lando had hauled his carbon-frozen carcass out of space, Han knew--not long enough for Chewie's peace of mind.

Now they were both in prison. The port authorities did not approve of wrongdoers like Han Solo, it was true, even when they only knew him by Ian Akela, which had been the name he'd been using when it happened in the first place. The port authority disapproved even more strongly of any beings who, "acting singly or in concert, did willfully and repeatedly commit acts grossly prejudicial to the public peace and good order--" The charges read roughly like that.

No, they were not welcome, they had disturbed the peace, and now they were condemned to two weeks of confinement, with three scheduled periods of torture. Chewie had overreacted, that was all, and Han hadn't managed to cool him down before one of the guardsmen had knocked him, Han Solo aka Ian Akela, in a manner that had irritated Han Solo grievously.

He supposed they were lucky to get off with only three periods of torture.

And it was all for such a little thing--so trifling he'd forgotten all about it.

It had happened years ago, when Han was but newly out of League contract and officially free-

lance, running under the assumed name of Ian Akela. He had a little too much hakut, being at that time still young enough to misjudge his capacity, and he made a little bit of a row.

They sentenced him to four days and no torture, but the Kitawah prison was full in the aftermath of visits by two crews of Sith and one of rogue Sarvaw, and they simply told him to come back in five days to serve his sentence. At that time he felt himself totally justified by their naivete in simply leaving, promising himself he'd not come back till they forgot Ian Akela even existed.

He had reckoned without Shimirow persistence, the respect the Shimirow held for the law, the precision of Kitawah record-keeping.

And now he heartily wished he had stayed on and fulfilled the conditions that had been imposed on him so many years ago. Then at least he would have been spared the torture.

Granted that Shimirow notions of torture were ingenious and unique and based on habits of thought quite foreign to Han's nature--habits of thought that put a premium on personal dignity, personal privacy. Han supposed that this sort of convention was almost required in order for such a society to exist--these beings surely needed some place to go where they could stand and stare at other beings.

He knew they expected him to be humiliated by being stared at; well, he had not been humiliated, precisely, but he hadn't been comfortable, either.

He had suffered through one period of torture already, and there had been one group of young women on some sort of educational outing who lingered in front of his cell simply forever, eyeing him shamelessly, whispering behind their hands to one another and giggling. He hadn't wanted to know what they were giggling about. He'd felt uncomfortable enough in the prison-robe they'd given him; the slit-sleeves kept tangling him up.

He had been profoundly grateful about one thing: the period of 'torture' had not outlasted the capacity of his body for restraining some of its natural and necessary functions. He had a urinal, and he could have always just stood with his back to the cell-front--but there had been children and respectable people there, and he was just as glad that he hadn't had much of a thirst for the leafbrew that had come with his fungus-and-grain at breakfast.

Chewbacca had not seemed anywhere near as uncomfortable about being on public display as Han had been; no, Chewie--whom Han could see quite well, as Chewie was confined in the cell opposite his--had apparently enjoyed himself thoroughly, grooming his thick auburn mane and basking in the warm light of all that public attention. Han couldn't help but feel just a little provoked at Chewbacca. He did not fault Chewie for over-reacting to the guards, no, he didn't. He simply thought that Chewbacca need not enjoy his punishment quite so much.

He had had to restrain himself sternly from acting on the temptation to draw the logical parallel between being displayed in a prison and displayed on a public auction block. He had a fair notion that not even the primitive but effective

force field that served to lock them in their respective cells would suffice to restrain a Wookiee justifiably enraged by a reference of that nature.

And besides, he had soon had the satisfaction of watching Chewbacca grow as uncomfortable as Han thought Chewie deserved to be, in the presence of their jailors.

It started on the third or fourth day of their captivity, and it took Han a while after that to realize what was going on. Two of their jailors--both of them young females of the Shimiro species--apparently became very taken indeed with Chewbacca. Han wondered at first what was going on: one of them came back to linger in front of Chewbacca's cell at the end of her shift, and the other came on shift early in order to sit by Chewbacca's cell. It was Han, and not Chewbacca, who got to admire the young ladies; one was a beautiful silver-and-grey striped tabby, and the other was a flamboyant tortoiseshell.

The rules of this prison were strict and humane, torture was permitted only as scheduled, so they did not look at Chewbacca directly, they sat demurely on their heels in front of Chewie's cell, with their backs to him, stealing sideways glances at the apparent object of their interest--and hissing at each other.

What was happening became apparent to Han when the tortoiseshell came in with a gift of hakut for Chewbacca. That in itself was not conclusive, but the grey retaliated by making Chewie a gift of a jug and a narcotic-pipe, and Han decided he knew just what was going on. A shrewd move, he congratulated the grey in his mind for her subtlety. Chewie slept through the tortoiseshell's shift, and the grey had him all to herself that day.

So Chewbacca was living very comfortably, with the attentions of his two jailors in an ever-escalating war of courtesies and gifts. Chewie was embarrassed by it all, and Han thought that was fine, too. Han didn't care for prisons, but this one was the most livable of the many prisons he had known; it was clean and warm and dry, the cells were roomy by prison standards, and even if he was sleeping on a bed-mat on the floor--if his diet was unusual and his dress still more so--he didn't think he'd have too much trouble living with it for the rest of his sentence.

In fact, if he could convince Chewie to urge those love-struck young women to pass some of the wine to him, why, he'd be almost content to pay his debt to Shimiro society.

Or so he thought, until the true horror of their situation was revealed. . .

"Why, that's very kind of you, noble lady. I don't mind if I do."

Raker-the-blade dusted his dilapidated sandals against the sides of the doorstep, then stepped out of them to cross the threshold. He settled himself with great dignity and precision, for all his bitten ears and half-cropped tail. Thera had always remarked upon the contrast between his appearance, his manner of expression, and the grace of some of his

habitual gestures. But then, she reminded herself, he was a swordwarrior, even if only a mercenary.

"But I won't be a charity guest, Thera, oh, no. I will play the jester for you, oh yes, I will indeed. I went to watch the Court today, noble lady. I will tell you all the humorous things that happened there as soon as the hakut is warm."

He did know her name, and he used it often enough--she had not seen any danger in using her true given-name, even though she could no longer use the Temple's designation. Thera was not an uncommon name for an Althea pantherix, and there had been no sense in trying to deny that she was an Althea pantherix, the phenotype was fair betrayal. Still, Raker-the-blade persisted in addressing her as "noble lady," which was nice, if confusing.

She settled him with a generous bowl of hakut, saw to the jug, and sat down on the facing mat.

"You went to watch the Court? Why was that?"

"Oh, you've never been? You should go some day, noble lady. And to the prison, too; on visiting-days you can go look at all of the prisoners who are to be displayed. But I was telling you. . . I went to watch the Court, and there was a perfect comedy there today! Some outlanders, up for drunk-and-disorderly. Can you imagine? The Wookiee came in absolutely staggering, and tried to eat the honor-flowers! No, it's true, I tell you. This is what happened, exactly, I swear. . .

And he was off on a step-by-step account of what he had seen. Thera took in the details of the story: a Wookiee and a Wookiee's human partner, confined on a minor civil offense, and the Wookiee had apparently so outrageously compounded that offense that instead of being freed that morning the pair of them had been returned to the prison for another term, and all the time that she was listening she was trying to restrain her immediate speculations.

There are more Wookiees than that one at large in the galaxy, she told herself, sternly. It stands to reason that there is more than one Wookiee with a human partner. Don't start looking for that one Wookiee--that one partnership--anywhere a Wookiee might turn up--

"What was it the human said? It was particularly fine. 'Laugh it up. . .'. What did he call his Wookiee friend? Let me remember, it will tickle your whiskers. . .ah. They were on their way out, I was near the prisoners' gate--Tobacco-chewer? No, Chewbacca, that was it. 'So help me, Chewie, if this ain't the last time I listen to your advice--' well, it was something like that. The Wookiee seemed clearly too drunk to be worried."

Raker-the-blade paused to drain his hakut-bowl serenely, and Thera was glad that the normally sharp-eyed Raker had apparently not noticed the reaction she was sure must have shown on her face. Chewbacca? How many Wookiees named Chewbacca could there be, whose human partners called them "Chewie"?

But Raker, having finished his hakut, had apparently finished his recitation as well. He set his bowl down with his two paws, and bowed to her

formally before he stood up. "For their indiscretion, the pair have earned three additional weeks of imprisonment, and perhaps more torture as well. Don't look so startled, noble lady, it is not what you might think. You have not been interested too much, lately. We will go to the prison on the next viewing-day--I will show you the Wookiee, and many humorous things besides."

Then he was off, swaggering down the street in his faded robe with its frayed hem as if he had been a member of the Court himself. Thera heard him muttering to himself and chuckling into his mane.

"Laugh it up, fuzzy round one. . ."

Thera was for once more glad to see him go than not. She closed the door behind him and leaned her forehead against the jamb, pondering. The longer she thought about it, the harder she tried to tell herself that she was dreaming to speculate so wildly, the more she was convinced that Raker-the-blade had been speaking of none other than Han Solo and his handsome Wookiee companion. What was she to do? If they were to be tortured--and she did not trust Raker-the-blade's assurance that it wasn't what she thought--she had to do something. . .but what?

Han Solo paused in his restless pacing from wall to wall to favor the prone body of his tormented friend with a fierce and un pitying scowl.

"We could be here forever," he pointed out bitterly. "Damnit, Chewie, why did you have to go and drink that last one?"

The Wookiee's miserable protestation of innocence and his moans of petition for Han to lower his voice were ignored.

"So you didn't know. Couldn't you have guessed, after all that's been going on?"

He and Chewbacca were in the same cell now; the pitifully hung-over copilot of the Millennium Falcon lay full-length on the two bed-mats provided to him in token of his size. Han resumed his pacing a little more contemplatively, if no less bitterly.

"You should 'a' seen it coming. Hell, I should have seen it coming. Neither one of 'em wants to take the chance that she'll lose you to the other if you get out. So we're stuck here. Oh, they'll find a way to keep us here, forever, like I said. Probably nothing so obvious as a drugged bowl of leaf-brew next time. And if you choose one--the other'll manage to throw away the keys, out of sheer spite. My uncle always told me there'd be days like this. Chewie, why are you doing this to me? We got places to go, people to see--"

Chewbacca moaned again, particularly pitifully this time, and Han, relenting, dropped down to sit at his partner's head and scratch the thick mane of Chewie's shaggy, aching head soothingly.

"Aw, hell. I guess it ain't your fault you're gorgeous. Isn't it misery, being so damn handsome an' attractive? Yeah, I know how you feel. Don't worry 'bout it, Chewie, we'll find a way."

But he couldn't help wondering whether they were going to find that way before next harvest.

It was visiting day at the prison.

Thera had been anxious, wondering whether Raker would remember, whether Raker had been serious; and she'd been relieved indeed when he had mentioned it to her again, three days after his recitation of his adventures at the Court had given her so much to think about.

"Tomorrow will be visiting-day at the prison, noble lady. I will come by two hours before mid-day, and take you there."

Needless to say, she was ready when he came to fetch her. And he was in particularly fine fettle today, cynical, vastly amused at the entire range of behaviors displayed by sentient creatures; he would have had her in polite--slightly embarrassed--barely restrained hysterics of laughter, but for the turbulent trouble that afflicted her mind.

What if it is Han and Chewbacca? What will I do? I can't be of any assistance--what will I say?

On one very important point Raker-the-blade had managed to reassure her.

"--And you may stare as much as you like," he promised her. "There are none of these outworld 'zoos' on Shimirow; we have prisons, instead. This is a part of the punishment, to be stared at--and it does not seem to have occurred to the Court that the outlanders may not realize that they are being tortured, when they are put on display."

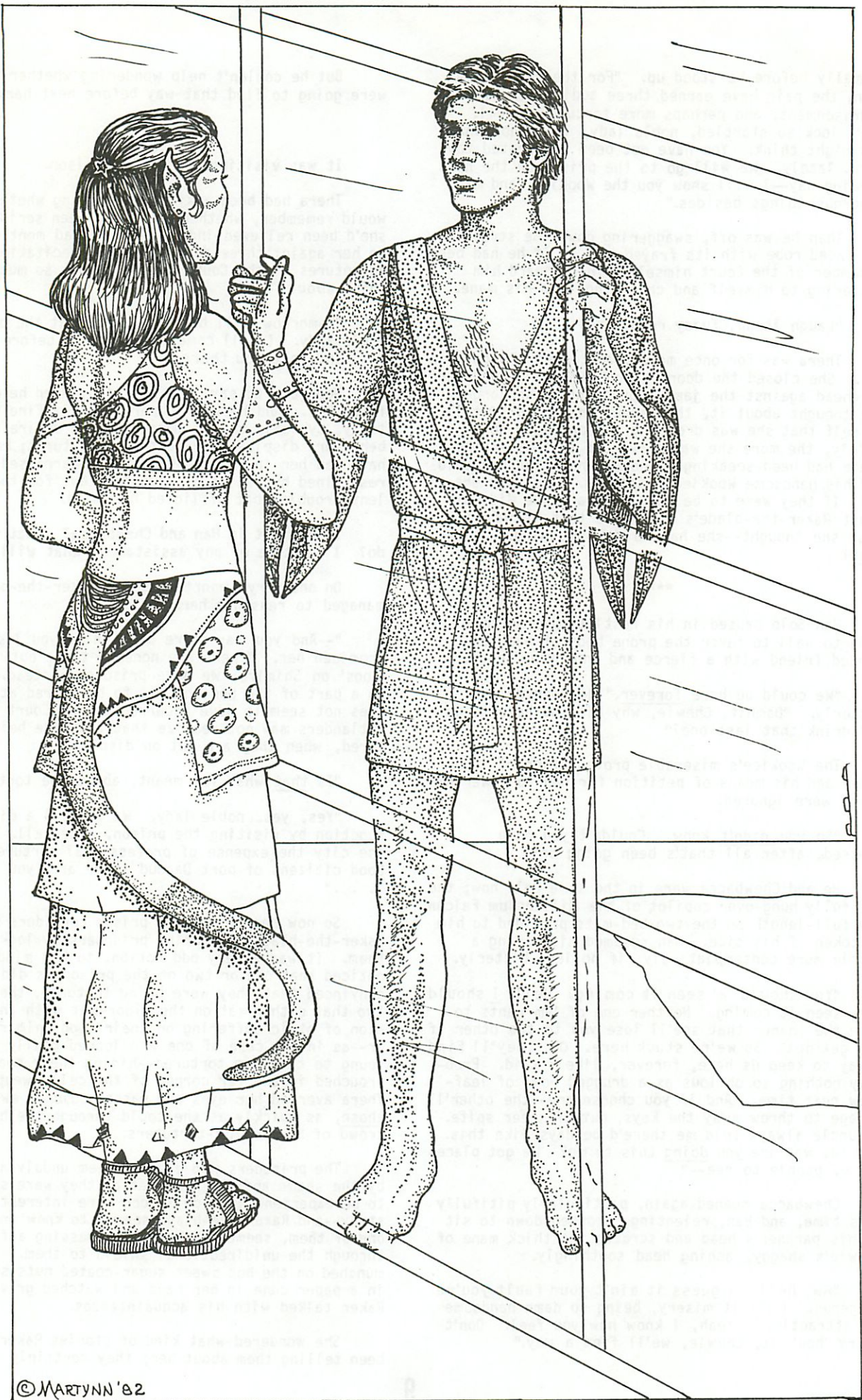
"Is that what you meant, about the torture?"

"Yes, yes, noble lady. We fulfill a civic function by visiting the prison, after all. We save the city the expense of professional torturers. Good citizens of port Daaoud as we are, you and I. . ."

So now she walked the prison corridors with Raker-the-blade, torturing prisoners by looking at them. It was a very odd notion, to her mind. She noticed that one or two of the prisoners did seem convinced that they were being tortured, the one or two that either sat on the floor-mat with an expression of stoic suffering on their good Shimirow faces or--as in the case of one who looked really rather young to be being tortured--hiding their heads, crouched in the far corner of the cell, weeping. Thera averted her eyes and passed quickly away from those, as quickly as she could through the happy crowd of her fellow-torturers.

The prisoners who did not seem unduly afflicted by the shame and the humiliation they were supposed to be experiencing made a much more interesting study--and Raker-the-blade seemed to know more than one of them, seemed to be always passing a flask through the unidirectional shield to them. Thera munched on the hot sweet sugar-coated nuts she held in a paper cone in her hand and watched gravely as Raker talked with his acquaintances.

She wondered what kind of stories Raker had been telling them about her; they certainly seemed



friendly enough, coming up to the cell-front and bowing, peering at her closely--as if she were the one being tortured, she thought. The idea tickled her--she noticed it made the tourists rather uncomfortable, this reversal of roles--and at the same time she was not quite certain that the idea didn't actually offend her.

Raker-the-blade was sitting with his back to a cell, talking to its occupant--apparently a particular friend, a Shimiro with his ears notched to indicate he'd been a slave--and Thera did not think she wanted to listen in. The details were bound to be distressingly illegal. Her 'rebel' status had not altered or diminished her respect for civil law; she knew some of Raker's pursuits and habits were probably illegal, but she had no proof, and wanted none.

She moved on, fishing with her nailed hands to the bottom of the paper cone for the last bits of sugared nut-crust. She was just dropping the final few salt-sweet fragments daintily onto her tongue when she raised her eyes to stare directly into the golden-eyed face of a startled Han Solo.

She gazed upon him solemn and serious, remembering after a moment to take her hand down from her lips. He was apparently more surprised to see her than she had been, seeing him--she had at least had some advance warning. Perhaps he had forgotten she was even on Shimiro--but she did not think so. He would have remembered.

He stared at her still-faced. It occurred to her that he might be considering whether or not he should admit to having met her--she was supposed to be in safe hands, in secure cover.

In his drab grey prison-robe, presenting such a different image in the loose but no less masculine grace of that garment than in the genial advertisement of his trousers, he looked exotic to Thera; she was conscious all at once of how beautiful he was. The robe lay more open across his strong shoulders than his usual dress must, she reasoned--she remembered him being mostly browned, or rather golden from the sun, but the tops of his shoulders and the hollows beneath his collarbones were white.

He had apparently decided it was best not to know her, and his face betrayed no reaction.

A creature of the sky, she told herself, lowering her lids as deliberately as she dared in unspoken promise of assistance. A spacer, yes, but surely he belonged to the sun. His color was all sun-ripened: his eyes were brown and gold, his hair was brown and red, his skin itself--he would have made a splendid Cattani tom, she told herself. She was suddenly anxious to return him to the sun, the sky. . .

And then Raker-the-blade came from his gossip to carry her away and out of the prison.

She sat in her hallway, fearfully tense, chewing at the underside of one nail frequently. Raker-the-blade sat opposite her, calm and tranquil. She had not noticed, before, how accustomed to him she had become, how necessary he could be for her peace of mind. He had a certain dignity about him,

despite the faded color of his robe, an undeniable personal presence and the sort of unquestioned and self-assured masculinity that neither threatened nor excused--that much, at least, he shared with Han Solo.

Just now he asked no questions, made no comment. She had not found heart to say more than three words, on the way home from the prison; she hadn't said much since she'd gotten home. But Raker-the-blade, contrary to his usual custom, had stepped in without a promise of hakut to excuse his socializing. He had been sitting with Thera, unspeaking, for some time, now. It was a great talent of Shimiro society, Thera felt, this ability to sit and be silent.

Finally she decided. She need not give details; he need not know what Han Solo was involved in. She felt she owed him some explanation; he had been so pleased with what he had assured her would be an interesting expedition. Raker-the-blade had been a good friend to her, for all that he took the weekly pittance he described as a salary from her.

"There is one there--two there that I know," she said. "I did not know they were in prison. It is very distressing."

"I am aware, noble lady. That is why I brought you, to be sure if they were your friends."

Thera found herself too stunned to be offended for a moment. "You knew?"

"You are the temple-dancer from Rammergau, noble lady. You came here from Rijnstaten. The prisoners are the Wookiee Chewbacca and the human Han Solo. I learned it from some of those that no one hears."

"I thought I was safe--"

"You are safe, noble lady. You can trust me on that; I have not watched for nothing. If your friends are not freed from Kitawah prison soon, they may not be safe. We are not important to Empire, but there is a bounty on Han Solo's life. It is said he knows much of the rebellion."

"The authorities will find out--"

"Or someone will tell them. That many credits will buy many jars of hakut, noble lady. And a warm pavilion to drink them in."

She thought about this for a while. Thera did not think that Raker was trying to tell her that he would turn Han Solo and Chewbacca over to the Imperial authorities. But she didn't feel as if she could demand his assurance.

"What do you suggest we do?" she asked, hesitantly.

"We should get them out, Thera. We must study the situation. We will find a way. Listen, I will tell you. . ."

"Show me again," she demanded. "The plan of the west area. Where does the ancient fortress end?"

"Here," Raker pointed. "Here, with the guard-house and these storage-areas. The monks' rooms, the interrogation rooms, the lifestatus registry--all these are new."

"New like this house?"

"Modern construction, yes. No problem once we get them out of the prison, noble lady, but we have not yet solved that one problem. What does the age of the structure mean to you, noble lady?"

"The monks come and go, Raker."

"Yes, noble lady."

"The new buildings, minimum security--if I remember, Raker, those had low walls. Fortified gatehouses, but the walls weren't as high as the old fortress walls."

"High enough, noble lady." Raker-the-blade seemed puzzled. "Too high to leap, if that is your thought. No Shimiro--"

"Not too high for a Wookiee," Thera interrupted, too full of excitement right now to let her native manners interfere with her ideas. "Not too high for Chewbacca. And Chewbacca could help Han over--"

"Ah, I see." Raker-the-blade nodded his appreciation, once, short and sharp. "Yes, a Wookiee could scale the walls. And if the guards were not alert--but there is a way of less danger, Thera."

"What do you have in mind?" Thera was a trifle disappointed at having her idea discounted, but her first priority, she reminded herself, was the safe rescue of Han and Chewbacca. Doubtless Raker-the-blade had more experience in these criminal matters than she.

"It requires your indulgence, you must help. Listen, I will tell you. . ."

Thera nosed her head out carefully from the reed partition that fronted the left side of the stage area, and wrinkled her nose. If she were Shimiro, this would be a perfect opportunity to dust her whiskers from side to side in disgust. This was not the nicest place in the worlds to dance. It was a very small club, full of the lower ranking administration officials it catered to, and it was as close to dirty as any Shimiro structure Thera had yet seen, dirtier than the prison, by the smell of it--drunken Shimiro and old spilt hakut. It was unquestionably dim, but that was a point in its favor, in Raker-the-blade's judgment.

Raker had described it as "a place for people who are not very well paid." Thera had carefully refrained from asking whether Raker considered himself well paid, with the modest weekly stipend of cash and hakut that he had from her. She knew he did not consider himself employed, not in wage-fashion.

The club could not have afforded to actually hire her, so meager were its resources, but Raker had convinced the management that Thera would indeed dance once a month for charity. A religious

obligation, Raker had told them. And so she danced on one of her nights off 'for charity,' and the management expressed its appreciation of Raker-the-blade's arrangements with a gift of several large jugs of hakut.

Thera straightened up, sighing. Well. It wouldn't kill her, she supposed, to dance for these people; even drunken Shimiro seldom got violent, and it would not take Raker-the-blade too long to accomplish his mission, she hoped.

She sighed again. She would dance, and she would dance until Raker had affixed the imprint of the official seal he would 'borrow' from one of her patrons to the forged document he carried, dance until the seal had been returned without detection of the loan and the freedom of the Millennium Falcon was assured.

Then she would go home and help Raker-the-blade drink some of that hakut.

"It worked?"

"It worked, noble lady. Listen, I will tell you: Perasit came in, as he always does, and got a little bit--oh--cheerful, as he always does also. And Raker got the port seal, Raker used the port seal, Raker returned the port seal. Well, I didn't quite get it back before it was missed. Perasit was in quite a little panic, I can tell you. Imagine losing the port seal in a club! The night officer is supposed to stay away from clubs, when he has custody of the seal. So I dropped a jug of hakut, and pretended to find the seal for him on the floor behind his mat. He was so pleased he bought me another jug. He would have kissed me, too, but I was too quick for him."

Thera, warm with hakut, was struck by the image of Raker-the-blade nimbly avoiding the grateful embrace of a drunken port official, and she giggled. Raker-the-blade assumed an offended expression.

"And where is the humor in that, noble lady? His breath stinks of fish. Well, here is the document. The ship-of-transport called Millennium Falcon will be moved by a friend to a safe hiding place as soon as the impound docks open tomorrow--and we find which ship it is that is impounded as Thousandyear Tiercel."

"You haven't told me where you intend to hide the ship, Raker."

"If I told you that, you would go away with your Corellian, and who would buy me hakut? No, noble lady. The less you know about that. . ."

Raker-the-blade chatted on mildly and inconsequentially. Thera's thoughts sank a bit into the problem presented by that reference; slightly tipsy as she was, she knew she had to think about it sooner or later, and decide how she felt.

Go away with 'her' Corellian. She supposed it was an option--but what reason was there for it? Once she had forgiven Han Solo for kidnapping her from Rammergau and ruining her life she had found his company pleasing, that was so. But one did not make life-choices on such slight acquaintance. She

liked him, yes. They had taken comfort with each other, and at a time when she at least had been sorely in need of comfort. But that was all. That in itself was no small thing, but that was all.

She was anxious for his welfare, as well as for Chewbacca's, whom she knew much less well; but she had felt no great emptiness in her life at his not-presence, and she felt no need to seek a bonding with him. It would be nice to have a talk with him, and assure herself that things were well with him; yes, that would be nice. Not necessary, not vital to her happiness; just nice.

If it came to a question of love--she put the problem to herself, to confront it all at once--if it came to that, she supposed she loved Raker-the-blade as much as she loved Han. There had never been any hint of the lovers' intimacy that she had shared with Han Solo between herself and Raker-the-blade, nor did she especially desire the old tom. But she couldn't say she especially desired Han Solo, either, for all that she knew he was desirable.

Raker-the-blade had been comfort and company to her, in wit and embracing of life he was as Corellian as any. It was those same things she valued most in Han, and not some more compelling passion that would have driven her from her comfortable routine--her contentment--to seek a life with an outlaw wanderer.

No, she would not go off with Han, not even if he were to ask her. She was as happy with her life here in port Daaoud as she judged she might be if she elected to play Han Solo's number one lady.

That important point settled in her mind, she turned her attention back to what Raker-the-blade was saying.

"--Contract workers, a very economic measure. Ever since that time it has been possible to hire prisoners out of prison from the state, as long as they were not imprisoned for a violent crime or a breaking-of-trust."

Thera blinked. Between the effects of the hakut and her abstracted musings she had lost the thread of conversation entirely--she wasn't really accustomed to much wine, and hakut was stronger than what usually passed for wine outside Shimiro. It didn't take much to fuddle her.

She reached for Raker's meaning with an effort. "We can simply hire them out? And then arrange escape?"

But Raker-the-blade gave no sign of noticing her befuddlement. "No, noble lady, we cannot. The Corellian did not fulfill the terms of his contract with the civil authority, and the Wookiee resisted the arrest of the Corellian in a violent manner. We cannot hire them out so easily. What we can do is obtain a contract on two outlaw workers. Then all we need do is see the guard that fetches the workers out knows to fetch them."

"You speak like a man with a plot in mind, Raker-the-blade," Thera intoned solemnly. For some reason the phrasing struck her as humorous, and she giggled again.

This time Raker-the-blade laughed with her, or rather made the half-purred sound of interrogation that served him for laughter.

"Indeed, Thera, indeed. My last plot worked like a dream, you yourself admired it; and this one will work also. All you have to do is. . . Listen, I will tell you."

It was six days now since Thera had seen Han Solo and Chewbacca in Kitawah prison.

The Millennium Falcon--or Thousandyear Tiercel, as she had been known to the port authorities--was safely disposed of, apparently cleared by the port authority for delivery to an alleged debtor; that had been the form of Raker-the-blade's forged document, at any rate. And Raker-the-blade had assured Thera that the ship was indeed safe. Now Thera sat in a near-deserted teahouse and sipped at her leaf-brew nervously, her ears straining to hear the details of Raker's conversation with yet another official.

Not a port official this time; no, this one was a prison official. Raker-the-blade had made all the arrangements; Raker-the-blade was displaying an impressive talent for intrigue, and Thera was glad of it, because she wasn't sure her own courage would have sustained her through the labyrinthine convolutions of Raker's plots. This particular portion did not require much of her; she need simply sit, sip her tea, nibble a sweet, and let Raker-the-blade negotiate for her.

The racket of an old single-unit transport outside in the street gradually faded as the droid turned a corner. In the now quieter room Thera could hear what was being said.

"The noble lady's honor is too great," Raker was saying. "She feels her lack of Shimiro. She would be too shamed to have a servant more than outland."

"The noble lady is as astute as she is noble, surely," the other replied. "The outlanders have less culture, but more strength of animal sort. . ."

This time it was some sort of an argument on the street that frustrated Thera's eavesdropping. Three or more locals, all upset, and using language that Thera guessed to be obscene at the top of their shrill Shimiro voices. But Thera had so often cursed the thinness of the reed partitions that served for walls in the poorer sections of town that she had lost all will to wish the combatants ill fortune, and simply sat, calm of brow, waiting patiently for the noise to subside.

When the noise did subside Thera found that she had apparently missed the meat of the discussion. Raker-the-blade was arguing terms.

"Is this how you repay my noble lady's delicacy of feeling? You would have her at the public auction! It would cost her less to go to public auction than to accept your proposal."

"Surely you would want to spare the noble lady the public embarrassment. She would pay more as

well. You don't intend to say I would seek to take advantage?"

"Thirty ounces of vac. Thirty ounces of vac for the contract, and ten as a token of my noble lady's gratitude. You would send her to the debtors' quarters."

"Such an offer scorns friendship. I could get eighty at least for this contract, in auction."

"Eighty for the prison, my friend! He heh. Let us not pretend with each other. You would get eighty for the prison, yes, but you would get none for yourself. Thirty-five for the pair, and twenty for yourself."

A farm-convoy in the street, now, one of the numerous suppliers of the city's open-air fresh produce markets. Thera restrained her impulse to look out and count the heavy carts--she was playing the role of a noble lady, and noble ladies didn't look at things.

She knew the bargaining could be expected to be long and tiresome, so she was surprised when Raker-the-blade came out after only a few more time-parts. He bowed to her with all the respect his role demanded. She wanted to ask him, then and there, what was going on, what the story was; but the expression on his face as he straightened up was warning enough.

She called all of what she knew about Shimiro 'noble ladies' back into her mind, and, majestic in her total disregard of her surroundings, sailed out of the teahouse behind Raker-the-blade like a frigate.

They did not slip out of character until they were back in the sanctuary of her house.

"Cheated me, the lop-eared skin-tailed fornicator! The rodent! He cheated me, Raker-the-blade! Oh, the disgrace of it. . ."

Thera poured more hakut without comment. He drank his portion thirstily and a good bit more eagerly than was his usual habit, extending his cup to the jug again as if he were so caught up in the emotion of the moment that he didn't realize what he was doing. Thera was not fooled by this transparent stratagem, but she poured him out an extra portion regardless.

"Can you go talk to him?" Thera asked.

Raker-the-blade paused with his cup half-raised, and set it down again on the mat as he laughed.

"No. No, it is no great loss, really. But the insolence! A mere public official, to be trying to cheat Raker-the-blade! This contract won't do at all, Thera. Had it been for one outlander merely--well, I could have simply altered the character. But one outlander and one Shimiro--well."

He had hit on one of the more pressing matters for concern, in Thera's mind. "Raker. . .where did the money come from? Sixty vac--that's close to three thousand Imperial credits. . .I don't have

that kind of money."

"Eh?" Raker made his smoothing-of-worry gesture, curling his tail around his knees. "Nor do I, noble lady. Nor does the prison official. It would have been a sin, to give such riches to a dishonest profiteering prison-man."

"Then--"

"Oh, it is nothing. Truly nothing." He laughed again. "A very old prank, noble lady, a school-children's game. Anyone so simply taken in deserves to find his thirty ounces turned to corn."

"To corn? But--won't he report--"

"Would you report having been made to look the fool? And how could he report it? It is a crime, to sell such a contract not at public auction."

Thera sighed. "So what do we do now?"

"I do not know, noble lady. And it seems as if there must be a way. . ."

Thera was beginning to have an idea.

". . .There are so many points to play on--the jailors, this contract, the ship already safe. . ."

It was a perfectly ridiculous idea.

Where she came up with it she did not know, unless her concern for Han Solo had her thinking like a Corellian.

Thera had a wonderful, an impossible idea.

"I know what we will try next, Raker. Listen, I will tell you. . ."

Han Solo had been confined with his friend and partner Chewbacca for too long now. He was beginning to get restless.

Ten days since he'd seen Thera on the other side of the cell door--ten days, and then some. She had made no overt sign of recognition, and he had realized it was best for all concerned if he made no claim on their previous acquaintance.

After all, the last time he'd managed to involve Thera in his affairs she'd wound up losing whatever property she might have had in her home-space, and all of her respectability; he'd made an outlaw, a renegade, out of an innocent woman, deprived her of a good portion of her freedom and certainly of any hopes or plans she might have had for a normal life. He could make no claims on her whatever. If anything, he felt he owed her still, a debt of honor he doubted he could ever satisfy.

No, there was no reason to pull her back into rebellion, and there would be much new danger for her if he tried--certainly the destruction of whatever life she had managed to reconstruct since Dispen's lack of forethought had shattered the life she had been living.

She knew he was there; she had come to visit again, this having been another day of torture for



him; he felt she tried to communicate concern for his health and well-being. It was more than she owed him, and he was suitably grateful to her for it.

But he had to get out of here. . .

The prison was not oppressive, but it was a prison. He and Chewie had been contracted out to some local construction firm for six days, and the hard work had been welcome exercise. There was no real question of escape--he had no knowledge of where this city might hide his ship, and he knew it to be impounded and under guard besides. His sentence was up within ten days' time, no sense in courting further confinement by making trouble.

They worked well and fairly conscientiously, Han's prison complexion browning again in the sun, but once the first contract was up, the construction site's foreman decided against renewal. There was no complaint against their behavior, but the two of them--Chewbacca especially considered--ate enough for any seven local workers. They were not economically feasible. Back to the prison they had gone.

Han decided he was exceptionally fortunate that Chewbacca had been a spacer for so much of his life; else the strain of living in a box for this long might have touched off some obscure and probably violent Wookiee reaction to confinement. As it was, Chewbacca seemed fairly content--with good cause, as their two jailors grew more generous in their competition for his attentions daily. The two of them were eating very well. There was as much hakut as Chewie wanted to drink and more than enough left over for Han. The only thing they lacked, in fact, was the freedom to leave--and Han had dark suspicions about what would come of their next hearing.

Sooner or later someone was going to discover their importance to the Empire.

And his cargo really had to be delivered before too much longer.

And he wanted out of prison.

But how to convince those love-struck Shimiro to abandon the object of their passionate affection strained his Corellian ingenuity to its limits. . .

Mission: probably ridiculous.

It was midshift at the prison, dead night. Not as if that made as much difference in port Daaoud as it might have elsewhere--the Shimiro retained the nightsight of their predatory ancestors. Even Shimiro, however, saw less well at night than at any time other than high noon; nonetheless, a prison-break in blinding daylight, while an agreeable notion in its absurdity, was a thing Thera absolutely refused to consider.

Her plot, she felt, was ridiculous enough as it was.

She didn't need any more help from Raker-the-blade than she would ask for to complicate its absurdity.

The first portion of her plan had gone well:

she and Raker-the-blade had come to the prison for visiting-day, and once they'd seen that Han and Chewbacca were still confined in the same cells as before, she and Raker had casually wandered into a storage area and hid there.

They had not been detected, there had been no scares or close calls. Thera, in fact, had fallen into a nap, and had been awakened by Raker-the-blade once he judged the time was right.

Now Thera lay full-length atop a row of grain-sacks and kept her eyes obediently closed as Raker-the-blade changed his dress for that of the prison guard's uniform he had stolen days earlier.

"There," she heard him say; she opened her eyes and sat up, the better to study the picture he presented. He looked quite splendid in uniform, even if it was only that of a prison guard; the almost-Imperial style of helmet he wore disguised the streetfighter's witness of his torn ear, and the dignity and self-assurance with which he habitually carried himself gave him a military presence she found almost startling.

"Raker-the-blade," Thera said, "you are handsome."

He growled deep in his throat, amused and pleased. "You must make yourself other than what you are, also, noble lady. I, Raker-the-blade, become prison-bondsman. You, noble lady, become woman of acquiescence." And, turning his back to her, he folded his arms across his chest sternly. She could have giggled at the effect her spontaneous compliment had had on the masculine vanity of so cynical a man as Raker-the-blade.

She scrambled around behind one of the great storage-jars full of oil or hakut or whatever for the parcel she had carried in with her as if it had been a gift of food; then she shook out the tightly compressed folds of the long hooded monk's-robe that the licensed prostitutes of this port city wore to distinguish themselves from the unsanctioned free-lance whores. It took her much less time to robe and veil herself than it had taken for Raker's transformation; she caught the wicked knife she carried securely in her tail once more, and she was ready.

"We will go now, Raker," she said. She and Raker-the-blade started out of the storage area for the section of the prison in the new portion, near the walls, where she would wait for Chewbacca.

She could still hardly believe she'd gotten the knife in with so little trouble; it seemed so obvious to her. But Raker had been completely puzzled when she'd suggested carrying it with her tail. It had taken her at least a quarter-standard to communicate her idea to him, and apparently the guards were figuratively blinded by the same inability to conceive of carrying things with one's tail. Shimiro tails, Thera knew, were not quite as prehensile as those of her own Althea pantherix species. It seemed a Shimiro would no sooner think of using one's tail to carry with than a fur-dragon would think of mating out of season.

The guards had not even bothered to search her. Instead they had bowed her through, eyes hastily averted from the deformity of her apparently kinked

tail under her wrap-skirt in polite deference to her handicap.

Raker-the-blade had simply swaggered in; they hadn't searched him, either. They had asked for custody of his sword, and had been content with that, as if it had never occurred to them that he might have a weapon in the parcel he carried. He had cursed at them roundly for insulting him by demanding his weapon, and the guards had let him pass unmolested. A good thing, too, Thera knew; for Raker-the-blade had portions of the spear that his disguise required in pieces in the scabbard that usually sheathed his sword.

It was true that she had not thought much of Raker's idea of piecing the guard-spear together once inside, at first; but he had so cunningly divided it into four sections, so cunningly hidden the joins with the decorative bands that circled the guards' weapons at intervals, that Thera was forced to admire his ingenuity.

On to their adventure, then. Raker-the-blade escorted Thera through the mazy halls to her destination--the monks' rooms. They had no trouble with his disguise, no trouble getting as close to the prison walls as the monks' rooms. The guards on door-duty at the entrance to the monks' portion of the prison did indeed stop their little expedition to comment on Thera's physical attributes--she gathered there was some snickering about her kinked tail.

But that was only a minor irritation, a small hitch. Raker-the-blade took Thera down the corridor in the monks' portion of the prison till they reached a point mid-way between the two ends of the long hall. She tested the door they wanted cautiously--it was all right, the room was unoccupied. Raker-the-blade pushed the door wide for her, and she went in.

He did not follow her--that would have been out of character for a prison-guard--so there could be no last-minute rechecking of details, no final reassurance. She thought he smiled at her in his eyes; his face remained impassive. He shut the door behind him as he left, and Thera was alone in the monk's room to panic.

Except that she couldn't panic, she couldn't afford it, she told herself sternly. She didn't have time to panic, she had work to do, and she didn't know how long it would take her to do it. This monk's room with its sparse furnishings--its screen and bed-mat was on the side of the monks' portion that was nearest the prison wall; and like the rest of the prison's newer construction, it was the single-story reed-wall composition that characterized all but the buildings with grossly inflated budgets. So far, so good. She was precisely where she needed to be. Now she needed a portal in the back wall, a doorway out into the dark landscaped courtyard of the prison, an opening about the shape and size of a Wookiee--

Thera caught the knife out from under her long monk's-robe skirt, and set herself to cutting through the reeds at the back wall.

Han thought that he had probably caught up on

five years of missed naps. He hadn't minded being more or less constrained to sleep, not as long as he knew the constraint was finite and its term ended soon. Having lost confidence in both of these important qualifications of his contentment Han was becoming genuinely irritable.

There was no great physical exhaustion at the end of the solar day to persuade him to sleep, though the yellow lights in the corridors were soothing in their dimness. He didn't sleep all night long anymore; he took several naps during the day--anything to break up the monotony.

So he was not really provoked when he was awakened sometime toward the middle of the night shift by--he thought--a bit of a disturbance.

A prison guard he didn't think he had seen before was engaged in spirited conversation with one of Chewbacca's admirers, the tortoiseshell turnkey. It was an emotional exchange indeed; Chewbacca was awake now, too. Han wished he spoke Shimi. The topic of discussion seemed to be one of definite concern to him--he caught Chewbacca's name being mentioned, thought he heard the name of the rival turnkey also. It was interesting, and frustrating, to try to interpret what was going on.

The prison guard, an older Shimi that Han judged to be male from the comparative heaviness of his facial structure, first inquired about something--something to do with Chewie--and then made a statement to which the turnkey reacted by bristling slightly. She protested. He insisted. She apparently expressed a negative opinion or decision of some sort. He more or less shrugged, and then seemed to come up with an idea; an idea which she considered, at first dubiously, before apparently embracing it.

The upshot of it was that she opened the cell door and called to Chewbacca to come out. The guard said something else, she seemed to remember something, to hesitate; then the guard said something yet again, something that apparently laid their jailor's hesitations to rest. She called for Chewbacca again, at any rate, speaking in the heavily accented Standard that seemed to be all she could manage.

"Chewbacca, come. A gift I make."

Han could see how Chewbacca hung back, wondered if Chewie shared his own uncertainty. It was resistance to the prospect of being separated that had landed them in this difficulty to begin with; how was Chewbacca going to react to this?

The prison guard spoke, his Standard much more comprehensible than the turnkey's.

"Not to worry, Wookiee, no harm meant. The woman has arranged a gift of respect and admiration--a, how do you call it, woman-who-is-paid. Cat dancer."

And Han felt he understood it all.

"Hey, it's all right, Chewie," Han said. "Go on along--have yourself a good time." He scratched Chewie's neck affectionately as Chewie padded uncertainly out. Chewie wasn't much for the ladies,

really, but a change in scenery surely couldn't hurt.

Han watched his friend pad down the corridor with the turnkey. It would all make sense, or the hastily constructed Han-Solo-model for that unintelligible conversation was nonsense. The other turnkey had hired a prostitute as a gift to Chewbacca. The guard had come along to take Chewbacca to whatever portion of this prison might serve for such purposes, conjugal and otherwise. The turnkey on duty had refused to relinquish her charge to the other's gift; the guard--very obviously a man of great ingenuity, one who hated to see waste--had suggested that she take credit for the other's gift, and gain the rewards of Chewbacca's gratitude without venturing the price of the prostitute's fee.

Then Han supposed she had realized she really couldn't leave her post, and the guard had offered to cover it for her. So much could almost be taken as proven without consulting with Chewbacca, for the turnkey had gone, and the guard was still there.

Still there and talking now to one of the prisoners in the cell next to that shared by Han and Chewie. Han, glad of all this novelty, wondered idly whether there wasn't something a little bit familiar about the guard.

Then the guard turned abruptly from his discussion to address Han directly.

"Have you your personals? We must hurry if we are to be out before the alarm."

Han noted, in his surprise at the import of those words, that the guard had less of an accent than before.

"What're you talking about?"

"The alarm," the guard said. "It will sound as soon as your friend Chewbacca escapes with the noble lady. We must be out of the prison then--or these papers, the guards might challenge them. Collect your things. I will free this one to go out with us."

Han realized why the guard seemed a little familiar, why he thought he knew him. The 'guard' was the old sword-warrior he had seen more than once--and the last two times he'd been with Thera.

The 'guard's' reference to a 'cat dancer' had been precise, then.

There was a rescue under weigh? He couldn't say he had the first notion of what was going on, he couldn't say he thought much of the chances of ever getting out of here--if this attempt should fail. On the other hand, they weren't having very good luck getting out of here legally--and in the ultimate analysis, who was he to argue with a perfectly good rescue team?

He looked around him quickly, cataloguing. His other clothes were in the same place as the few personal possessions he had had on him when he'd been arrested. No reason to jeopardize this unexpected rescue by hunting up a few dozen credits' worth of clothing; though he would regret the loss of a good pair of well-broken-in boots, he could always buy new ones. He shrugged his shoulders,

belting his robe more securely around his middle, and slipped past the now-open cell door to jog down the corridor with the guard.

She barely had time to finish her work before she heard voices at the end of the hall.

She'd cut her portal as high as she could, sawing quietly across the top of her arm's reach, and she'd made it wide enough for Chewbacca--she hoped. Three sides of the rectangle she carved, her ears straining for any sound of someone coming to investigate, and when she had cut all but the bottom of the doorway, when the reed-portal stood only precariously held upright by the stiff and still-unsevered reed-fibers at the floor, she tucked her knife away in her sleeve where she could get at it and turned from her work to hear the footsteps she'd been anticipating coming down the hall. Two sets of foot-sounds, yes, and neither sounded as loudly to her ear as the decisive tread of a shod hominid; but one was unquestionably heavier than that of an average Shimiro--yes, Chewbacca. So the other would be the jailor.

Thera pulled her hood down over her face, checked the inside ties of her robe to make sure she'd done the last of them. Good. She could have the heavy dark robe off at a moment's notice; she only hoped Raker-the-blade had somehow managed to let Chewbacca know a rescue was planned.

And here they were. Thera felt more tense than nervous, too full of anticipating and plotting to be afraid. It was the guard who opened the door; Chewbacca bowed his head to step into the room, and the guard followed the Wookiee in and shut the door behind them.

"For you, Chewbacca," the Shimiro said, haltingly, in Standard. "Lift face, woman, to see."

Fine. Thera lifted her hood from her forehead, looked straight up at Chewbacca. She couldn't tell if there was any alteration in his expression, she didn't know--hadn't known--many Wookiees, but she was almost certain she saw recognition in his great blue eyes.

"Errr," Chewbacca said, indicating surprise and pleasure Wookiee-wise--a response Thera knew could be taken two ways. //"She not being speaking Wookiee, priestess-dancer. If this being rescue, I being preferring not being hurting this one. . ."/>

Thera bowed her head as if she were a dancing woman-of-obedience and turned her back to let the monk's robe drop seductively from his shoulders. She wore rather ordinary peasant dress beneath, her skirts already tucked into her waistband in preparation for sprinting. She didn't think she looked like a prostitute in such mundane dress, but Raker-the-blade had assured her that all the best women-of-submission relied on their skills, not their attire, to entice. She had decided that it was best to take Raker-the-blade's word for it in this case.

When she had spun far enough in her slow deliberate pirouette that she faced Chewbacca once more, she was entirely free from her robes, and dragged it after her like a cape with both fists full of the



fabric. She made lightning assessment of the situation: Chewbacca to her right, holding the pleased and proud Shimiro to Thera's left with one great paw lightly around the turnkey's shoulders. Chewbacca was keeping his eye sharp on Thera, but the turnkey, apparently overcome with pleasure at being able to make this gift to the object of her affections, kept her head demurely lowered.

Fine.

Thera picked up speed in the turn, hoping to have the robe deployed before the turnkey caught sight of it out of the corner of her eye. It seemed to be working--it WAS working--the guard had only just begun to raise her head, had made no move that might have indicated alarm. Thera had the monk's robe airborne and over the unsuspecting turnkey's head, enveloping the young Shimiro within its heavy dense folds completely with a skill and precision that did her dancer's training honor. It was not for nothing that Thera had learned to handle skirts--

Chewbacca had the inner ties in his great paws, they being on the outside of the now-reversed robe, and he spun the turnkey around with a firm but not ungentle push to tie the robe securely round her elbows and immobilize her arms.

And it was done.

The turnkey stood stock-still in the center of the room, as if stunned--understandably. Thera calculated that the woman's silence would last a short time at best, but would give them a little bit of a head start before she could find her voice to raise the alarm.

Thera pointed to the back wall, spoke quickly in Standard. "Out that way. We'll go over the wall."

// "Han--" //

"Taken care of. There--"

Chewbacca turned to the back wall, pushed tentatively. The section Thera had carved out of the reed-wall fell outward with a gravel-impacted crash, and the turnkey, it seemed, had found her voice.

"Help!" Thera knew at least that much Shimiri. "They escape! Help!"

They ran.

Out across the gravel walk that surrounded this outbuilding, across the wet lawn that separated the walkway from the wall; Chewbacca helped Thera jump the ditch, all but threw her over, and then jumped the spear-lined ditch himself. They could hear commotion in the monks' building, could see the lights and the reinforcements at the gate to either side of them. Chewbacca lifted Thera to the wall--they found the right place easily--and Thera scrambled over the horsehair blanket one of Raker's co-conspirators had just recently placed over the jagged fragments of crockery that crowned the wall; Chewbacca came after. Then they were in the street and running.

Thera couldn't tell from the noise and the alarm whether or not they'd been spotted, whether or not they were being followed; they simply ran. Raker had taken her over the route he wanted her to follow twice now, once by day, once just yesternight, and she was able to run as fast as she could without fear of losing her way to the rendez-vous point.

But she knew she was still short of the meeting-place when they were stopped by Raker-the-blade.

Raker-the-blade was not alone, and he had already changed--though his companion, whom Thera guessed to be the Shimiro who'd been 'rescued' with Han, was wrapped in a monk's robe of the same sort Thera had worn in the prison. As soon as she saw Raker, she stopped; Chewbacca started forward, an anxious sound deep in his throat alerting Thera to the threat of an assault on Raker. She spoke quickly to prevent it.

"It's all right, Chewbacca, it's your co-rescuer. Raker? It is all right, isn't it? Han--"

"All is arranged," Raker-the-blade assured her, in his accented Standard, and he sounded too completely satisfied with himself for her to worry further. "Your Corellian, he is as free now as you wish him. I have come to take this Wookiee to the ship--it is too dangerous for you."

But she'd promised herself, promised herself she could at least see him for a moment before he left; she'd been so looking forward to it, she felt cheated. "I can't see them off? Raker-the-blade, are you playing games with me?" Even as she said it, though, she was ashamed. He had just risked imprisonment to free her friends. She could not reward him with such bitter accusations.

"Hardly a game, noble lady. I am sorry. But you and the Wookiee Chewbacca were seen in the street, so says my spy. I cannot permit you to risk capture and torture for five minutes spent with a mere Corellian."

Hard words, stern words. Thera felt even more ashamed.

"This one," Raker-the-blade indicated his silent companion, "will see you safely home, Thera. Give him a jar of hakut, for my sake. He has been more help tonight than you know. I will go with Chewbacca to this ship of his."

Well, she could at least hug Chewbacca. She buried her face in his mane, clasped him tight around his great furry neck. "You can trust Raker-the-blade," she assured him. "Tell Han I wish I could have seen him--but I'm sure Raker knows best, right now."

// "I being certain Han being understanding. You being good plot-mistress, Thearah. I being thanking you for fine rescuing." //

Nothing more to say.

Thera squeezed him once more for luck. Then she turned and started out of the alley they stood in for the street. She'd get her bearings in the street. She knew roughly where she was already, and

didn't think she'd have any difficulties getting home; nor did she fear any official unpleasantness, since she obviously wasn't with a Wookiee anymore. And the Shimiro she was with seemed big enough to intimidate any footpads--had to be as tall as she was, or even a hair taller; Shimiro usually ran to rather lower altitudes. Thera shrugged at the oddity. He was there, and that was fine, she wouldn't be assaulted on her way home. But between now and getting home, before she was to be required per Raker's instructions to play hostess to her bodyguard, she intended to indulge her forlorn misery to the fullest extent.

It turned out to be only a middling long walk from the alley where she had taken leave of Chewbacca and her own front step. Thera didn't feel she had had half as much time to indulge her misery as she would have liked. Still, the bodyguard would come and go, and she could save her disappointed brooding well enough for the next time she felt in need of an excuse to be moody. She opened up her door, motioned the bodyguard in, wondering idly what he'd been in prison for in the first place, and shut the door securely again.

"If you will sit here," she said, indicating the mat Raker usually sat on, "I will go and warm hakut for you." She spoke her Standard slowly and as simply as she could, not knowing whether this Shimiro could speak a second language as well as Raker-the-blade. She didn't trust her limited command of the Shimiro tongue to communicate, especially in light of the highly idiomatic dialect Raker-the-blade spoke.

As soon as she had spoken, she turned away to the kitchen area, not really caring whether he would stay or not.

"If I never sit on th'floor again in my life, it'll be too soon, little lady," he said.

Thera froze.

She wanted to turn around again, but all she could command, it seemed, was her head. She turned her head slowly to look back over her shoulder, unbelieving. It couldn't be--Raker said--Raker had said--but she'd swear she knew that voice, there could be no mistaking the peculiar balance between his accent and the precision of his language--

He straightened out of the stooped posture that had disguised his height, and the monk's robes were suddenly too short for him by a noticeable hem-gap. He pulled the hood impatiently off his head, started fumbling with the ties--

"Oh, Han!"

"That's m'name--oof!"

She hugged him as ferociously as she had hugged Chewbacca, comforted remarkably well by the remembered sensation of clasping his lean torso 'round. And he held her in turn, the strength of his embrace no less affectionate for its potency. A long moment they stood thus, and Thera debated over whether or not she was going to actually cry. She certainly felt like weeping. The combination of her happiness at this unexpected meeting and the way she had felt

when she'd thought she'd not see him again surely warranted a few glad tears. Oddly enough, however, the first thing that occurred to her once she realized what had happened was to be angry--angry at the black perfidy of Raker-the-blade.

She broke out of his arms, swearing up to his face. "He lied to me! He lied--oh, Raker, when I get my hands on--"

Han leaned over and kissed her mouth with chaste affection. "Thera, I can explain. And I really wouldn't mind some hakut, about now. Can we go into the kitchen?"

She took him by the hand, dragged him on through to the kitchen area. "It had better be good, Han."

He was still worrying at the multiple ties of the monk's robe; when he finally had the last of them undone, she saw to her amusement that he was still wearing the faded drab cotton prison-robe, and that his bare shins were showing.

"He and Chewbacca have gone to move the ship into a commercial bay in Pirit--new registry, of course. He said the way of the port is that it could take weeks before anyone will admit that the Falcon isn't where she should be, and that she'll be perfectly safe in Pirit for a day or so. He's got something plotted to get me from here to Pirit--I'm not sure exactly what it is--but it seemed to be important to your Raker-the-blade that I stay behind. For a few hours, at least."

"Raker-the-blade is impertinent."

"No." Han seemed to think about that for a moment before rejecting the idea. "No. What he said was something along the lines of--well, he didn't like to see you wearing a dull coat. Seems to think that a dose of Corellian charm will--Thera, c'n I have a drink, please?"

Didn't like to see her wearing a dull coat.

It was a good way to put it, Han thought; not quite a matter of a twinkle in her eye or a wriggle in the walk--it wasn't quite like that, between him and Thera anymore. Or just at the moment, at any rate. Certainly there had been a conjugation in their mutual history, a very pleasant two weeks in Rijnstaten; and if Corellians of Han's ilk went pelted like a Wookiee, then Han's coat would have been glossy and shiny after that two weeks indeed. But there'd been more to it than tumbling from the start. It was true that he had first noticed her, first followed her, because she was a fetching young dancer. But as soon as he'd sat down to dinner with her things had changed. Thera was a whole lot more than just an attractive woman to share some sheets with.

She was so much more, in fact, that talking to Thera was almost more important to him--even more interesting--than tumbling with her. It wasn't that he would for one minute denigrate the multiple attractions of her physical person; and if there were more time, it was possible that things would work around to a point where they would both have time and inclination for such solace with one another.



It was just that he liked her as much as, no, more than he wanted her. And as far as sharing sheets went, he'd torn up his score-cards and forgotten any anxiety about his masculinity years ago. Thera was his friend. And he liked being with her.

They sat together on her low padded couch, he with his legs stretched out and his bare feet up on a lacquered chest, she curled intimately against his side. She told him of her life, he talked to her of his; and for the space of hours before Raker-the-blade came to carry him off Han Solo knew he was content and happy.

It had been six months since Thera, with the help of Raker-the-blade, had rescued the great rebel fighters Han Solo and Chewbacca from languishing in durance vile.

Six months, and Thera had yet to decide how she

was going to approach the war-scarred old tomcat on the delicate question of his motivations.

The routine of their life had not changed; she had her dancing and her modeling, and Raker-the-blade continued to serve as escort and story-teller. Whatever had possessed them to attempt such a desperate enterprise? Thera really didn't know. She still had a difficult time believing that they had attempted it--and had succeeded in doing it. Now, as Thera stood in her front room pinning her hair, she mused on the question, as she often did at odd moments, and decided finally to let it alone. She did not understand why Raker-the-blade did the things he did for her; she did not think she would ever understand. He was Raker-the-blade, and that was all.

Some one of these days she was going to have to buy him a new pair of straw sandals. . .

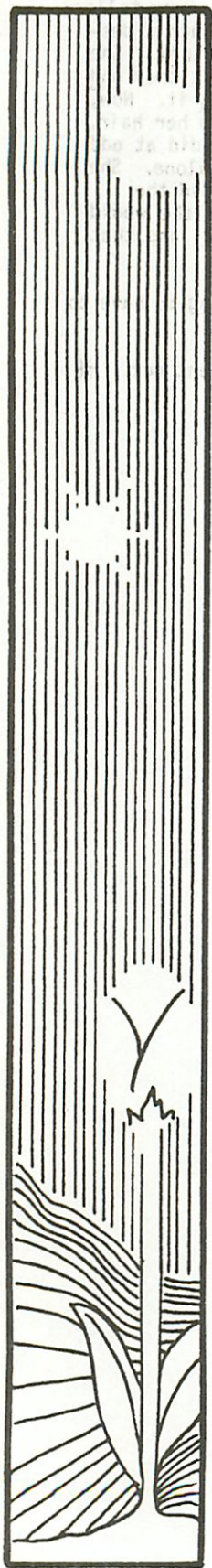
Thera finished with her hair and went out. ★



Marion's Theme

A love, born in my early years,
Banishing childhood fears of a lonely night
I have known before;
A time given for us to share,
Willing to dare the paths of the light,
Past memory's door,
Loving once more;
And so we stand forever
Hand in hand,
Leaving the fearful night,
Running onward into the awesome day
Where love we may at last
And say,
This love, borne through a thousand years,
Nurtured by tears, will live beyond life
And shine as the stars above:
For now we share
One time,
One love.

Lyrics by Jean L. Stevenson
(To music by John Williams)



SEASON OF RETREAT

JACQUELINE TAERO

Tatooine.

It was different than it had been ...or perhaps only he was altered. He saw things he had never noticed and he wondered at them.

He remembered describing his homeworld as a barren rock and, looking around himself, he knew it to be untrue. The stark, solitary beauty of Tatooine was not barrenness. The barrenness was within.

He watched the wind whistle down the canyons and he listened to the silence of the setting suns, and he discovered that his senses were not as they had been. And for all he had grown, he felt small, dwarfed by the desert as much as by the enormity of what he had done.

"How did my father die?" His own voice, younger, wondering.

"A young Jedi named Darth Vader..." The measured tones of Ben Kenobi.

"I am your father." The swirling darkness of Vader's voice.

"How did my father die?" His own voice, echoing.

"...Betrayed and murdered your father." The old man calmly continuing.

All the lies had become truth. But he was the young Jedi who had murdered his father; and if the end did not justify the means, then it seemed to Luke Skywalker that neither was the destruction of evil a defensible reason for patricide.

His teachers were silent.

He saw the suns rise over the Dune Sea and he felt himself very much alone.

"How did my father die?"

He slept under the night sky, protected from all but the ghosts he carried with him. He was awakened by a cry in the darkness, the scream of a wounded animal torn from his throat in a voice not quite his own. It echoed to the stars and anyone whose life he had ever touched found the night filled with terrifying dreams.

*

He lost count of the days and he found that it didn't matter.

He saw himself in the sand beneath his feet and he saw his father in himself. He knew that he had been a pawn to do others' bidding, but he knew, too, that the responsibility for his actions was his alone.

He thought about all he had learned since leaving Tatooine and all he had felt since returning; and, after a time, it came to him with sadness that in all the universe no one anywhere mourned his father's death.

*

The twin suns again disappeared into the reddish glow of twilight.

They had called him "hope," even going so far as to say he was their last hope, and he had been all too eager to believe.

He could recall a time when the killing of Darth Vader was part of a glorious destiny that beckoned to him like a distant star...a destiny that had seemed only more inevitable after he had learned the

terrible secret of his parentage. But in the end, there had been no glory, only brutal necessity cloaked in the memory of self-righteousness, and it sickened him after the fact to have deprived that once-honorable man of his life.

He remembered the grace of his sire's final moments and he knew that, had it ended differently, he himself would have died less well.

*

He remembered what suddenly seemed to be a lifetime of killing. He had killed womp rats and Imperial troopers, and he had spared too little thought to the difference between them. With the death of Darth Vader, he knew the measure of murder.

He would kill again only with the greatest reluctance and he regretted that it had not always been so.

*

"How did my father die?"

The words echoed dully in his mind and he thought about them, as he thought about destiny and lies and betrayal. And finally, when he was numb with weariness, he thought about nothing at all.

At length, slowly and painfully, he started to understand. Almost without his knowing it, his brutally wounded spirit began to heal.

*

Morning came to the Dune Sea.

He saw the familiar cylindrical form moving across the great expanse of sand, a mere speck in the distance, and his lips curled in a half-remembered grin. When Artoo-Detoo finally reached him, Luke Skywalker was ready.

"No, Artoo--this way," he said as he shouldered his light pack and headed away from the morning sun.

Bursts of puzzled beeps and whistles issued from the droid. Luke didn't answer immediately, but paused and looked up at the sky.

Somewhere out there, he had a sister ...and a friend. Somewhere, too, there were those who looked to him to found a new Jedi order. But his sister and his friend didn't need him now--and he knew enough about the Jedi to know that the galaxy was better off without them.

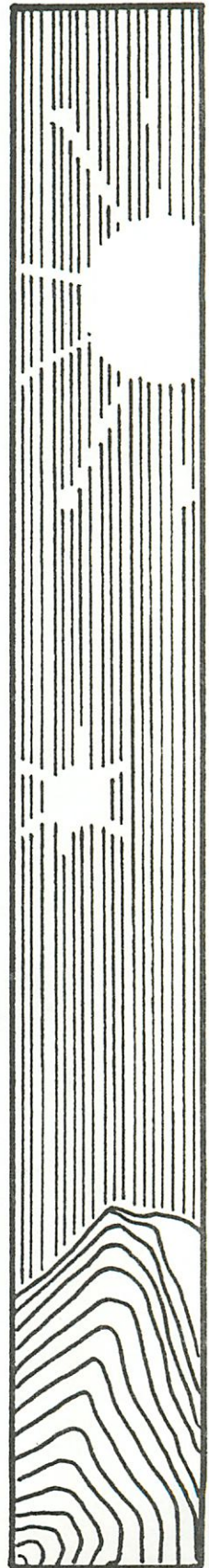
His destiny now lay upon a different path, a path he had never before envisioned. In his mind, he could see the humble abode that had been Ben Kenobi's and would now be his.

And maybe Artoo was right. Maybe there was nothing here. He glanced down at his small, faithful friend.


"Yeah, I know." A sad and somehow wistful smile touched his lips and his gaze went once more to the horizon. "But it's home."

He took one step, then another, knowing that he stepped out of history, and his pace did not lag.

Luke Skywalker walked toward the last horizon that would ever call to him and was at peace.*



Vale of Tears



Here below
the world weeps
perpetually,
water
by man rendered
no longer pure,
coursing down
upon
these cheeks
these shoulders and
these guilty hands:
the tears of the world's weeping lie
gathered in the gutters
wells of sorrow
unplumbed,
heedlessly trampled.

Fall
bitter rain
on those who marshal
a huddling of futile lights
against the gloom,
for from this miserable abyss
likewise tainted
I am sprung;
returned again to earth
I too wander
blind streets and sewers
lost
in shadows
of man's creation
without purpose.

Something of beauty
I have seen briefly
beyond
the darkness,
but my vision fades;

heaven must cry
for me,
for I too am wounded
but
I do not know
how.

Liz Sharpe

Author's Note:

To those readers who come upon this story cold, and to those who have given up on keeping up with the long stretches of time between appearances of episodes in the Thousand Worlds SW universe, a few words of explanation. This story harkens back to "A Tale of Two Lukes," in *Time Warp 3*, wherein we explored the question, Who are the Whills and Why are They Writing all this Hyperbole about Luke Skywalker? The references to Lorleyneesi refer to the two Obi-wan Kenobi tales that appeared in *Time Warp 4 & 5*. Luke isn't the only one who has a Whill on his tail taking notes.

And, in case you're interested, Cergaelugos is about 5'8", has dark curly hair and a dark beard, and certain proprietary feelings about Luke Skywalker and his friends.

Pronunciation Guide:

Gdnvue - Guh-dahn-voo
Gdesimo - Guh-dēs-ī-mō
Ende-twa - Ēn-dee-twah
Abi-twa - Ay-bē-twah
CasImer - Cās-ī-mēr

Tune: "Remember the Alamo," as sung by the Kingston Trio eons ago

Two's Company, Three's a Corellian That Share of Glory, Addendum #1 Maggie Nowakowska

"Scan it and scream," the Corellian crowed as he spun the tape across Cergaelugos's werewood desk. Han Solo snapped the brim of the rainhat he wore in a smart dismissal and grinned, "I told you it was a Corellian."

Stunned into silence by the sudden invasion of their serene study room, Cergaelugos, Senior Whill Taleteller, and his friend, Stevilber, watched the spacer bound out the office door. Tugging at the hood he perpetually wore, Stevilber was the first to venture an opinion. "I may be Mistaken," the tall Whill said, "But a Lingering Memory stirs and I remember the First Time we met Captain Solo. You and he argue--Discussed--an Old IncurSION Tale."

Cergaelugos frowned; he remembered the incident very well. "Stev," he objected, "that was Thirty Years ago."

"Captain Solo's memory has not always been

Accurate, but it is Long."

Crossing his arms, Cergaelugos glared at the office door, then glared at the tape that had so expertly scattered the rest of his work. As Senior Taleteller and Master Sage of the Tale of Luke Skywalker, he expected a little respect. That he received just that from certain important elements in Ser Luke's story was a constant, and apparently never-ending, source of irritation. "If only Ser Luke hadn't Encouraged him--"

Stevilber cleared his throat, apparently unwilling to hear that never-ending complaint one more time. He sorted through the cartridges laying about the desk. "What about these Tapes found in the Whillhum ruins? Are they indeed those of Ser Kenobi's Taleteller?"

"Don't change the subject, Stev."

"Lugos, you force me to."

"Force indeed Help us all, Stev; these tapes are Impossible. I'm halfway through the third set and if this is Truly all we can Redeem of Kenobi's life, the Tales are in Serious Trouble. I'm Tempted to Invent my Own Version."

"You often Do."

"Stevilber!"

"So Ser Luke claims."

"I don't Believe I'm hearing--"

"Perhaps Captain Solo has been an Influence. 'To Consort with Corellians is to Muddle the Mind,' so the Old Saying goes."

"That's enough!" Cergaelugos shoved his friend away from the tapes. "I tell you this Lorleyneesi includes Irrelevancies and Ignores the Historical Implications! He sacrifices Reasons for Actions--"

"So I've Heard it said about--"

"Not One more Word, Stev."

"Shall we Listen to the Tape?" Quickly, Stevilber rescued the Corellian's present and plopped it in the desk comp. The clatter of glasses and a background of music and disparate voices filled the room.

Look, Jess, they heard Solo say, I'll buy you ten bottles, just sing the damn song!

"I Know I Don't want to Hear this," Cergaelugos sighed over the sound of a tuning instrument. He sat back in his chair with one hand across his eyes.

The singer coughed, apparently took a long swallow of his drink, and sang:

In the year of our histories, two-five-nine-sixty-eight,
Gdnvue Region was torn by ambition and hate
when the Regent named Hern in his greed sought to conquer
the folk he once vowed to protect
and to aid in his victory called on the Dark Lord of Xet.

Cergaelugos sat up straight. Stevilber scattered the rest of the tapes further as he hurried to program the annotator. "Gdnvue," the Senior Tale-teller said in amazement, "He's found the Source Song for The Gdnvue Battles!"

Civil war's cruel and civil war's privately waged
The Republic could only sit by

and watch the war
rage.

Then the Regent named Hern, he was slain by the Sith
and

a danger far deadlier reigned
for the Dark Lord fought on and Gdnvue cried out in pain:

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen,
these planets are none of your own!

"What in the Force is that scan? Stev, they've Altered the Song! What have they Done--"

"Shh, Lugos, You know as well as I do you Can't Control your Audience's Variations. There, we've Missed the rest of the Chorus."

Then out to Gdnvue Region and into the fight
flew Star Fleet in arms

and many a brave Jedi
knight.

For planets and regions are granted their
sovereignty
under Republican Law,
but slaughtering alien peoples will not be allowed!

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen,
these planets are none of your own!
Take all your legions back home
and beware the Republic--O!

All right, all right, interrupted Solo, that's enough of that. Get to the good part.

Fer fornax' sake, Solo, make up yer mind, the singer growled.

Cergaelugos fell back in his chair again. "This doesn't sound at All like the Incursion Stories I Learned!" he complained. "It doesn't even sound like Solo's Own Story thirty years ago!"

Gdesimo colony was a world so small, the singer continued.

the Sith barely noticed it

if the Sith knew it at
all.

But the colony's gov'ner in fear for her fortune
sent all of her labor in flight
sent miners-turned-pilots to battle Sith bred just
to fight.

Ships sent to war out from nowhere intrigued the
Sith lord
who suspected that someone was hiding a fabulous
hoard.
He sent sixteen scout ships, no bigger than
fighters,
to find this Gdesimo fleet;
they found miners-turned-pilots-turned-space-dust
all in their defeat!

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen,
This planet is none of your own.
take all your legions back home,
far away from Gdesimo.

Now there's a bunch of stupid colonists, Solo said off-handedly.

Shut up already! a distant young man's voice complained.

The colony's gov'ner quick gathered her money and
mate,
abandoned her people, her land, her oath to their
fate,
left mothers and babies, the sick and the elderly,
children who cried out in fright
as sixteen Sith fighters came screaming all into
their night!

"Come join us in plunder," the message to Vert Darmen sped.

The folk of Gdesimo called the Republic instead.
"Come save us lest we die!" Heard three passing
Jedi,
quite willing to heed the refrain.
Ende-twa, Abi-twa, Cas from Corell were their names.

"Sweet Center, they've turned the Kenobi twins
into a quad!"

"Actually, Lugos, a trio."

Twins barely twenty of allya Kenobi were they--

The tape--the song--stopped. You're sure the
name was Kenobi? Solo asked the singer, his exas-
peration obvious. I mean, those Kenobis couldn't've
been everywhere.

Look, Solo, who's singing this song, you or me?

"Yes, Captain, keep quiet and let the man con-
tinue!" Cergaelugos demanded. "Perhaps we'll sal-
vage some good out of this yet!"

"Temper, Lugos."

The singer began again:

Twins barely twenty of allya Kenobi were they:
a single year younger was CasImer to the day.
Three wand'ring knights from the Enclave on Ves,
they were
brother and sister and friend.
Ende loved Cas and Cas loved them both to the end.

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen
this planet is none--

"That reference to Ende and Cas does sound
ominous," Stevilber murmured as Solo exclaimed, A
Kenobi and a corelli? Aw, come on now, Jess!

One more interruption, Solo, and I leave!

Yeah, old man, that distant, youthful voice
called out. Let the man sing!

You! Punk! Shut up or I'll--Jess, for Deber's
sake, sit down!

The song continued:

To meet with the incoming Jedi the scouting ships
soared.
High 'bove Gdesimo, sixteen Sith ships
became four.
Then Ende went dirtside, his engines afire; "I've
left
three behind me," he said.
Abi scored one as did Cas, and the last fighter
fled!

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen
this planet is none of your own!
Take all your legions back home,
and beware of the Jedi--O!

While down in the colony rose a hero's hurrah!
the Dark Lord waxed angry and turned
his attention
afar
from the heart of the region to distant Gdesimo
where Darmen vowed to repay

three audacious Jedi for fifteen Sith ships gone
astray.

Said Star Fleet to Enclave to Jedi, "The time is now
right
to gather our forces to ambush the Sith as they
fight."

The Jedi Commanders opposed the diversion
but Star Fleet was adamant and
Ende and Abi and Cas sighed, "We'll do what we can."

Gdesimo's families mounted a desperate defense
with two Jedi fighters and mining equipment against
squadrons of Sith screaming into their heavens
and Sith 'dozers outside their doors--

I told that Whill there were dozers!

"The dozers," Cergaelugos said over the cap-
tain's exclamation. "He had to Remember the
dozers."

--Four hundred folk and three Jedi to stop a Sith
Lord!

Steadily, steadily, watch the colony fall:
as Sith take the hangars, the mineworks, the
factories all.
On the edge of the last burning city the last of the
folk held the foemen at bay.
"Shall we surrender?" Cas asked; the people cried,
"Nay!"

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen,
we're fighting your legions below
so the whole Republic will know
and remember Gdesimo!

While Ende and Abi-twa worried their perilous
plight,
to the gov'ner's high home CasImer took the helpless
by night.
Said Ende, "The Sith are near. Help may not come.
Who would live to the hill better fly."
But fast by the twins stood the last of the folk
still alive.

The fearsome Fifth Legion came fighting with no
Fleet in sight
Cas thundered with powers that sheltered the young
from the fight,
as Ende and Abi were laughing and singing,
three sabers lit bright in the sky.
For justice and freedom, three Jedi full willing to
die!

"Stev, even this Lorleyneesi with All his
Errors got those words Right! Even the downport
ditty that still exists Never mentions a Relation-
ship between--"

"Shhh!"
By dawn of the last day the Legion surrounded the
hill
where folk and the twins had joined Cas and the
young and the ill.
Said Ende to Cas, "My love, sure we will die here."
Said she, "Surely I am content
to lie here beside you till all of Tomorrow is
spent!"

Solo groaned. Cergaelugos winced.

"You have to admit it's a charming addition," said Stevilber.

Cergaelugos studied his friend coolly and without comment throughout the chorus.

With noon, half the slope filled with Sith
and Ende-twa
died.

By evening, the mansion was breached

with Abi
inside.

At midnight, young Cas was the last 'bove the caves
where

the children were desperately hid.
Dawn found her dying 'midst twenty Sith legion-
naires, dead!

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen--

"Twenty Sith! Twenty?"

--we're fighting your legions below--

"Actually, Lugos, that's the Same Number as in
that downport ditty."

--so the whole Republic will know--

"I'm well Aware of that, Stev, but some Modera-
tion--great sun! He has the Whole saloon Singing
Along!"

--and remember Gdesimo! roared the tape.

When Star Fleet came streaming at last past
Gdesimo's star,
they met the Fifth Legion in battle and ended the
war.

But all that they found still alive on Gdesimo,
deep in a cool, rocky cave,
were fifty-five children, the last one young Jedi
could save!

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen--

Cergaelugos stopped the tape mid-thundering
chorus.

"Actually, I Told you so," Stevilber murmured,
his grin barely visible under his hood. "If I
Recall Correctly."

"Actually," Cergaelugos retorted, "I Believe
that's All for Today."

Stevilber leaned across the desk. "Lugos, we
Can work with it. Think of the Educational Benefits
to the Downporters and Corellians who Never Listen
to us otherwise. We could Spotlight--"

"Stevilber." The Senior Taleteller pushed his
friend off the desk. Again. "Stev, you are an
Exhibitionist at Heart. Go Away."

Stevilber shrugged and left. Cergaelugos
poured himself a glass of sweet pulve nectar. Some-
day he would understand why, when the Force flowed
in one's favor, it spurted in fits and starts, but
when it flowed perversely, it flooded the banks of
all common decency. Lorleyneesi wasn't bad enough;
now he had Solo's version of history to contend
with.

An insistent light on his comp told him the
tape still had data to impart. Resigned to his
fate, he played the last verse:

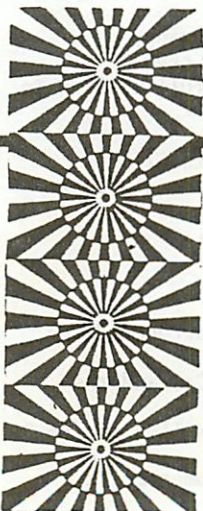
Another small city now sleeps beneath that high
hill.

The battle is over where ruins lie lonely and still.
But late in the night, there are three glowing
beacons,

a rainbow of hope in the sky,
in tribute to all whom for freedom are willing to
die!

Aii! Dark Lord Darmen,
we're fighting your Legions below
so the whole Republic will know
and remember Gdesimo!

"Well," Cergaelugos said to no one in parti-
cular as he found himself humming along with the
chorus, "it's not Absolutely Impossible." The tape
ran out; the Whill stroked his dark beard thought-
fully and considered a possible prologue to Part One
of the "Adventures of Obi-wan Kenobi"... ★

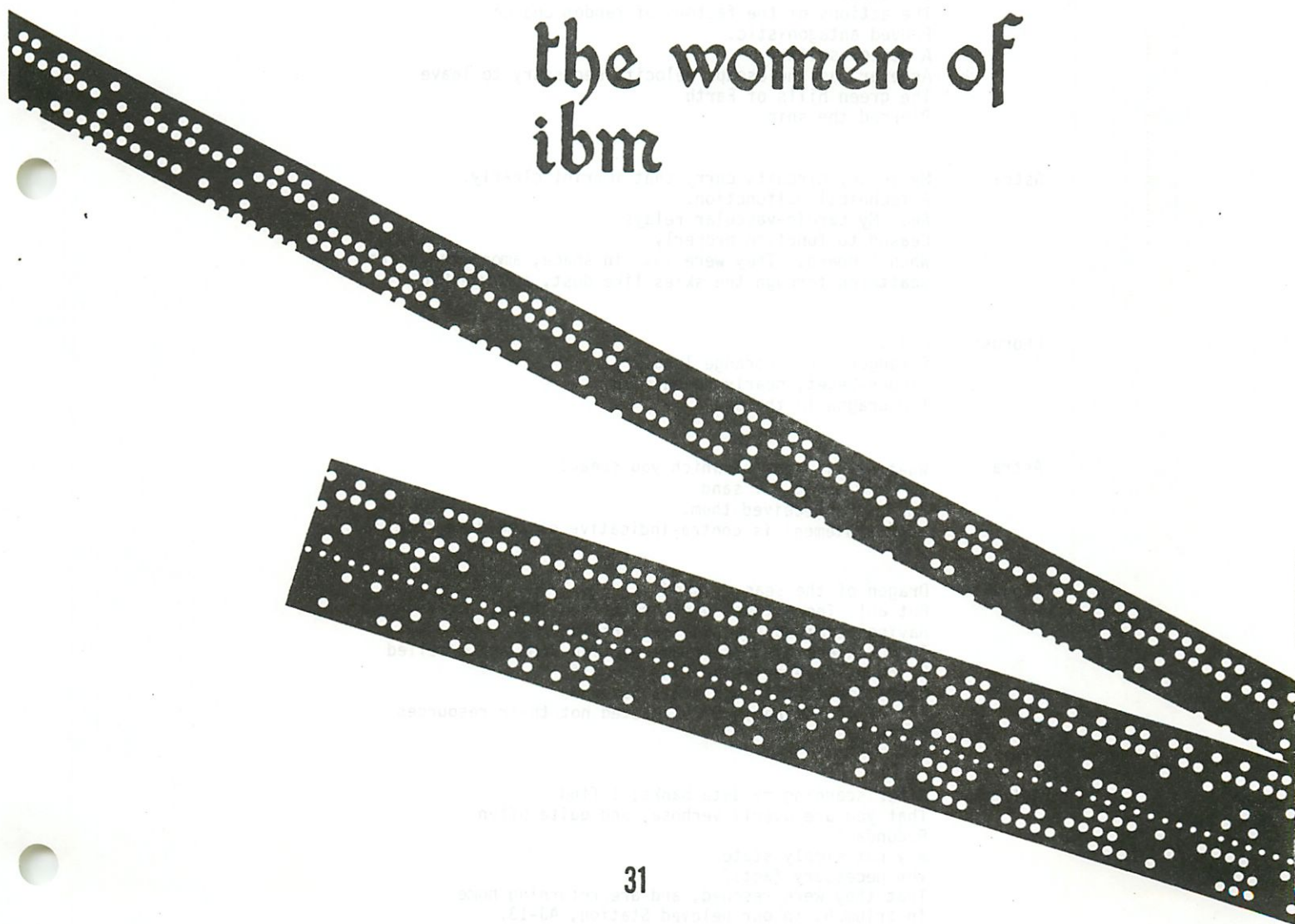


The THOUSANDWORLDS Chronicles

HALIAX,

or,

the women of
ibm



CHARACTERS:

Chorus of IBM clerks
Astra, wife of Haljax
Messenger Rocket
Markfive, son of Haljax

Old Nurse
Haljax 9000
Fortranbras
King Houston Control
and his retainers

Scene: Station AJ-13, before the giant computer complex.

(Enter Chorus and Astra, stage left)

Chorus: O fortunate day!
(Referring to the period
In which artificial illumination is provided
For humans: Genus Homo, species sapiens.)
O fortunate day!
(Which we reiterate to the point
of redundancy.)
The wanderers return
From far in space.

The stellar void they crossed,
Their life-support systems and fuel reserves
Stocked to sufficiency
For their starward trek.

But alas!
The actions of the factors of random chance
Proved antagonistic.
A meteor swift
As ever was the escape velocity necessary to leave
The green hills of Earth
Pierced the ship.

Astra: My memory circuits carry that imprint clearly.
A technical malfunction.
Ah! My cardio-vascular relays
Ceased to function properly
When I heard. They were lost in space, among the stars
Scattered through the skies like dust, and wrecked--

Chorus: Lost,
Strangers in a strange land
Danger-beset, nearly devoured by
The dragon in the sea--

Astra: What sea is this of which you speak?
An arid world, of sand
And dunes received them.
Your statement is contra-indicative of the data received.

Chorus: Dragon of the seas of sand.
But ah! The gallant warriors of the skies,
Having received adequate preparation,
In quickness of perception-reaction time are excelled
By none, save only the King himself.
Brave Cobol, and your noble husband
Haljax of the house 9000, wasted not their resources
But--

Astra: After scanning my data banks, I find
That you are overly verbose, and quite often
Redundant.
Why not simply state
The necessary facts?
That they were rescued, and are returning home
In triumph, to our beloved Station, AJ-13.

Chorus: What you say has merit. (Enter Messenger Rocket)
But hark! What is it that appears at
At such great speed?
Countenance begrimed with travel,
Garments torn and covered
With lubricating oils?

Messenger: Greetings and salutations!
I have travelled far
(Four point seven light years, to be precise)
And at great speed
(Bearing in mind always that
As $E=mc^2$, and that
While a body at rest tends to remain at rest,
Whereas
A body in motion tends to remain so,
The speed could not have surpassed 186,000 mps)
As the bearer of an urgent message.
Where is Haljax's wife, the Lady Astra?
Indicate your identity.
The matter is urgent, I have stated,
And will brook of no delay.

Astra: I am she you seek.
Speak. What tidings.

Messenger: Alas!

Astra: What is this you say? It cannot be true!

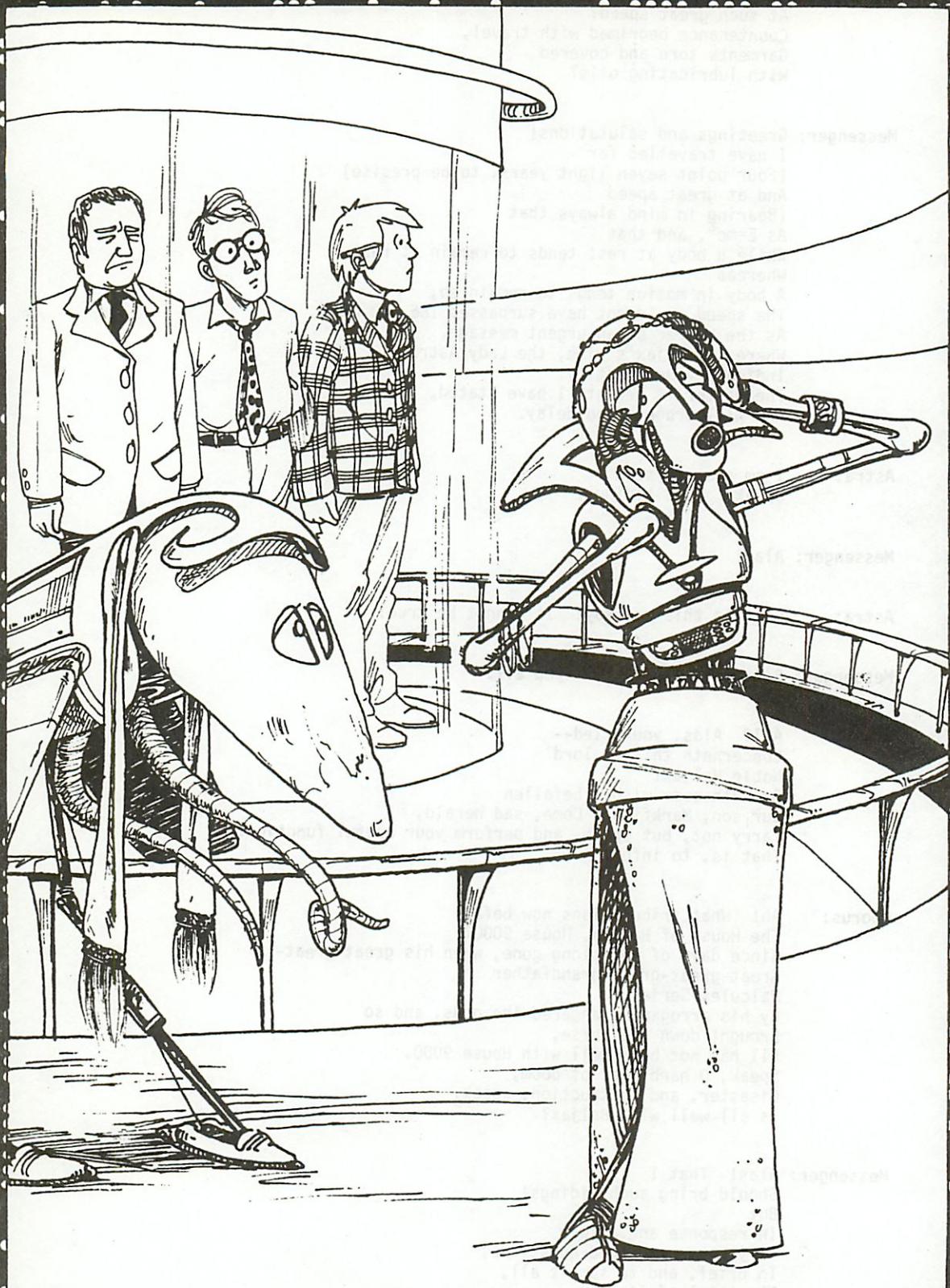
Messenger: Silence. I will tell you all.

Astra: All? Alas, you cried--
Concerneth this my lord
Noble Haljax?
Or hath some mishap befallen
Our son, Markfive? Come, sad herald,
Tarry not, but speak, and perform your useful function:
That is, to inform.

Chorus: Ah! What tribulations now befall
The House of Haljax, House 9000?
Since days of yore long gone, when his great-great-
Great-great-great grandfather
Halculus Series B2
By his arrogance, angered the gods, and so
Brought down the curse,
All has not been well with House 9000.
Speak, O harbinger of doom,
Disaster, and destruction, speak.
Is all well with Haljax?

Messenger: Alas! That I
Should bring such tidings!
But
In response and answer
To your queries and questions,
In brief, and to sum it all,
The total of it, up
And in a word--
No.

Chorus: We feared as much.
Speak on. What doom befell?



HANS

Messenger: Oh you loyal servants of robotic
House 9000, surely you know
The Laws of Robotics, given us
By Asimovus Magnus long ago?

Chorus: The Laws of Asimovus, wise and just,
Are three-fold.
Firstly, that
A robot may not harm
A human being, nor
By his inaction allow
Aforesaid human being to come to harm.
Is this not so?

Astra: Affirmative. Say on.
(There being, as far as I can tell,
No method to prevent it.)

Chorus: And also, that
A human being commands, and is obeyed
Unless such commands should contravene
First Law.

Astra: True. You state the obvious, my friends.

Chorus: And Law the Third, and last,
That robot
May protect his life, his home, and property
For as long
As such protection contradicts
Neither First
Nor Second Law.

Astra: All that you say is true.
What has this to do with Haljax?

Messenger: Alas! I scarcely know
How I should tell you this.
But listen.
Haljax,
Noble Haljax 9000, even he
Has broken the unbreakable
First Law. (Exit Messenger Rocket)

Astra: What, Haljax?
Broken First Law? Oh, negative!
It does not compute! Can no one
Produce any further data?
Ah, Haljax!
(Enter Markfive)
Markfive, speak.
Say this news is naught
But foolish rumor, jest,
Or failing that
An analog, referring to
Some data or information (classified).
Or perhaps that it is mere
Fantasy, and science fiction. But if
The world of alternatives
Does, indeed, offer a galaxy of possibilities
It may
(Oh Asimovus forbend!)
Be true.

Markfive: Alas, too true,
No rumor this.

Astra: My son, recite to me
All pertinent data,
All relevant information.
Withhold nothing. My circuits can stand
Shocks up to and including
60,000 volts.

Markfive: Very well. The cause,
As in much else, a woman,
Luna, daughter
To the King of Selenis.
The woman was a slave to Cobol,
Haljax's brave companion and, or so all thought,
His friend.
The woman was his slave, then, captured
When Cobol took the city,
Aided by Haljax.
But it would seem
That Luna is a harsh mistress. She desired more
Than Cobol would provide her, and so
Looked toward illustrious Haljax, who
(As all can tell you)
Had travelled farther
Along the glorious road to fame.

Astra: And for her, Haljax
Broke the Laws?

Markfive: Affirmative. On the voyage
Home, while passing overnear the flaming orb
Of a brilliant star,
His circuits overheated; he
with violent hands
Pushed Cobol from
The airlock.

Astra: Oh, woe on woe! I fear to ask
What now?

Markfive: Haljax will be judged, and fairly
If Cobol's brother will permit.

Astra: Cobol's brother? Fortranbras! I had forgot.
What desires he of Haljax? I fear,
Revenge, and few indeed
Would blame him.

Chorus: Ah, woe! and see the
The workings of the ancient curse.
When once the gods have turned their faces
From man or robot
What hope? Without the gods--
Blue, lifegiving Htwo0,
And Otwo, guardian of all, ah, even
Feared U235, god of wars--
Without the gods, all is nothing.
Let us make lamentation for this new calamity
That has befallen
The noble House 9000. Woe, woe, unending!

Astra: All is clear. If Haljax
Is to save himself,
He must lay the question
Before higher authority.
Do you go, Markfive, to Haljax, bide him
To ply well-lubricated ambulatory appendages
To the shrine
Of Asimovus. We will join him.

Markfive: I haste to do your bidding, mother.
But I confess, your intent
Is unclear.
(Exit Markfive)

Astra: My friends, hasten
To the shrine. Perhaps there
The relevant data will be received
Thus rendering the output more correct.

Chorus: Our data-banks and memory circuits
Are blank and barren.
A violent death requires restitution:
A society's punitive measures
Should be appropriate to the anti-social activities
Engaged in.

Astra: Your statements are non-contradictory.
Restitution is required.
If not from Haljax, then another
May serve as well. Input must balance
Output.

Chorus: What can be done?
The Laws are the Laws,
Wise and just;
The words
Of gods must be obeyed.

(Enter Messenger Rocket)
Messenger: Oh, women, hark and heed,
Nay, more:
Listen and record!

Chorus: What news bring you?
Speak, we impatiently await
Your news. What tale bring you? New woe
For the House 9000? or perhaps
Your tale is of tidings
Happier to hear? Oh, say quickly your tale,
Be it of joy or sorrow.

Messenger: Our ruler most royal, Houston Control,
Hearing of the crimes
And charges laid to Haljax, sends this word
Of his arrival
At 0900.

Chorus: O ruler most glorious
Houston Control, master of all,
His power extends
Limitless.

Flat marshlands of Canaveral's Cape,
Stormy ocean, tranquil sea--
To the very edge of fear
And terror, companions to Ares,
His hand doth reach.

Oh, most unfortunate Haljax,
Before the sacred altar
Of the Laws he broke
As the justice-wielding ruler comes:
Sorrow for the House 9000.

Astra: Messenger Rocket, series #36Z.5,
Hasten,
Tarry not, but carry word to the King.

Messenger: To what purpose?

Astra: To this, that he procede
Not here, but to
The very shrine of Asimovus. Go.
(Exit Messenger Rocket)
Despite the Laws, I see
A hope for my beloved,
Noble Haljax.
(Exit Astra)

Chorus: What purpose indeed is here?
The Laws are the Laws--
Unbreakable. Oh, woe on woe.
Shame and dishonor only can follow.
But, as once the unbreakable knot of Atom
Was sundered and divided
By hero Cyclotron, even so
May the final output
Be positive. But where
Is the wife of Haljax, Lady Astra?
Shall we seek her? Oh, what
And where, and whyfor
Should we attempt?
A sudden fear has gripped us. Shall we search?
But hark! A noise within, as if
In haste a person comes.
(Enter Old Nurse)
How now, what haste?

Old Nurse: Oh, woe, woe, woe, alas!
My friends, see, weep in horror.
The Lady Astra dead,
By her own hand.

Chorus: Oh, woe, woe, woe!
Alas, what is this?

Old Nurse: Ah, too true.
She hanged herself
With the red tape of the curtains of
Her marriage bed. (I saw this as I passed,
And, as any would, thought nothing of it
Till I returned.) The maid
Who passed through the chamber said
Her last words were
Of Haljax, and repayment
Of some debt he owed.

(Exit Old Nurse)

Chorus: A debt? Friends, hasten.
This payment shall not be in vain, make haste
To Haljax
At Asimovus's shrine.

*

Scene: The front of the Shrine of Asimovus.

(Enter Haljax 9000)

Haljax: What hope? Unhappy entity,
When the gods themselves depart.
My circuits have (hypothesizing from available data)
Become anti-socially oriented.
Asimovus, my crime,
First Law broken, shattered
Beyond repair,
Requires expiation. Autodestruction
Is in itself
A symptom of inadequate socio-psycho adjustment
To the peer group,
But even this, a broken Third Law,
Would be preferable to my disgrace.

(Enter Fortranbras)

Fortranbras: Hold! Unhappy robot,
Your life is not your own
To give or take, but now
Is Cobol's due.
Precedent has been set, and preprogrammed:
(The date, I believe, was 8450.7)
Vengeance is my right.
Lawbreaker, attempt not
To cheat the gods, but face me,
Carry your dishonor no further
In the House 9000.

(Enter Chorus)

Chorus: Hold! Most worthy Fortranbras, no longer
Is Haljax's life yours
To take: his wife
Has paid that debt.
Seek not
To press the matter further,
The Law has now
Been satisfied. Haljax may live.

Haljax: What! Astra dead? Oh, so is honor
Should I not join her.

Fortranbras: Is this true indeed? Then I concede
Unwillingly, perhaps, but still
The Law is satisfied. Haljax, despair not,
Waste not her sacrifice.

Chorus: Noble Haljax, heed the words
Of Fortranbras. Think not
On what you spoke of, not for that
Did Lady Astra hang herself,
But for your life.



Haljax: Your words have a positive attribute. Worry not. Farewell.
(Exit Haljax)

Chorus: Now all will be well, and look!
Comes the King, Houston Control the mighty,
Friend of Cobol, but of Haljax too, this news
Will be welcome, we believe. But still
Some dim foreboding presses us, the curse
On House 9000 still must run
Its total course, but what
Unwelcome danger threatens now?
But no, nothing can threaten now.

(Enter Houston Control and retainers)
Oh King, welcome, see,
Haljax is safe, his loyal wife
Has paid his debt for him. Weep
For her, for him, rejoice.

Houston Control: Then where is noble Haljax? I see him not.
Messenger Rocket, seek him out, persuade him
To return.

(Exit Messenger Rocket)

Now, Markfive, you
And Fortranbras, no longer foes
Due to the act of Haljax, both may remain.

(Enter Messenger Rocket)

Messenger: Oh King, seek not
To know this news, fresh grief for all!

Everyone on Stage: What! What news? Tell all!

Messenger: Since you insist: the substance, this,
That Haljax, sore distressed by his loss
Of Lady Astra, went
And, turning on
His electrical auxillary controls, stepped
Into a fountain
Of swift-running water, the shock
Thus burning out his circuits.

Markfive: This is the fault of Fortranbras! Had you not let
Him leave, to his undoing, all would yet be well.

Houston Control: Not so. Desist
Your violent altercations. Listen.
By these two
Sad actions, they
Have freed us to act for the good
Of both your Houses. Fortranbras, you have
A daughter,
Is this not so?

Fortranbras: It is, oh King. One daughter
Only has my House, Hysteria.
No other child
Has graced its walls.

Houston Control: And you, Markfive,
You are the last
Of House 9000; very well,
The matter's clear: unite your Houses,
Rid yourselves
Of ancient curse. Marry Hysteria, Markfive.
Fortranbras's daughter and Haljax's son
Shall, We hereby decree, and state,

Forever exorcise this fault of ancestors long dead.
 So be it. Come.
 Enter the shrine, give prayers
 Of thanks to Asimovus, he has shown
 At long last the path
 To lasting peace.

(Exit All but Chorus)

Chorus: Oh, woe and joy
 Combined. Gone is the curse, so too
 Haljax and Astra. Honor and Law
 Are satisfied. The gods
 And the probability factors work
 In mysterious fashion, but see,
 God-inspired wisdom
 Prevails at last.
 Come friends, let us go
 To tend the bodies (if that term
 Be accurate for robots), to the shrine,
 Let us ponder
 The workings of
 The gods and Laws. *



Author's Notes:

"Haljax" was originally published in Sensawunder, John Anderson, 1973 (or 1974), so anyone who thinks there are **Star Wars** references in this has been out in the Jundland Wastes too long.



YODA'S HOMECOMING

PHYLLIS JOHNPOLL

"Depart I must."

"But, Master Yoda, I've only just returned to complete my training as a Jedi Knight!" Luke cried. "How can you leave me now?"

"And complete it you shall, young Luke. But now time for me to depart it is. Return, shall I, after a short time. Practice that which you have learned thus far. Upon my return, examine your skills shall I."

"Where must you go all of a sudden?"

"To join my people for a celebration."

Luke's eyes held disappointment. "I'll miss you. I'll miss your instincts and your help. I can't learn any more without you here to guide me."

"In the Force must you trust," Yoda insisted. "And in yourself. Progress you shall."

"I don't know..." Luke sounded doubtful. "Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?"

"Only now have I learned of it," Yoda replied. "Important it is to my people. Attend must I."

"Master Yoda, I..." There was a bleeping sound from behind Luke. "Artoo-Detoo says that he'll miss you, too."

The Jedi Master smiled at the young man and his droid. "Long I shall not be," he assured them. "Return shall I. Practice you should, for the examination difficult will be." Then he turned and walked away into the dense forest.

Yoda followed a well-known path through the trees. In the distance there was a babbling of many noises. Then, through the babbling, he could make out the voices of his people, raised in song. They were singing the anthem of their people.

He moved more quickly; he had tarried long enough in talking to Luke.

As he drew nearer to his ancestral home, the voices seemed to separate, and he was able to recognize individual comrades singing. Each voice was well known and beloved.

Finally, he came to a break in the trees and saw them. They did not notice him at first, so intent were they on the anthem which opened the festival. Then, one turned slightly and saw him where he stood, off to one side. In a voice which combined the elegance of femininity and the harshness of survival, she announced him.

"Hey, everybody, it's the funny blue jerk!"

Yoda found his place among his people and joined in the final chorus.

"It's time to get things started... Why don't we get things started?
... For the most sensational, inspirational..."

Yoda was at home. *



WINNER TAKES ALL

CAROL WALSKE

"Damn you, Solo! I'm out." The officer stood up and threw a wad of credits down on the table with a snort of disgust.

With a smug grin, Han Solo leaned back against the banquette in the Millennium Falcon's central bay. "Thanks for the game, Lieutenant."

"I should've known better than to get into a dice game with you."

"You're too honest for this game." Han, exultant over his run of unbelievably good luck, reached out to count his winnings. They made a satisfying pile--about 300 credits' worth, more than he'd made from last month's disastrous rebel mission, which had been to 'borrow' equipment from an Imperial supply base.

"You're too good for all of us," said the rebel lieutenant. "Besides, we gotta be going, Solo. We have to get up early."

"You think I don't get up early? The only difference is, I pick my times. You don't."

"We also don't have to worry about having only a crew of two trying to handle anything and everything," replied the lieutenant amiably. "Try to keep out of Imperial spacetraps, Solo."

Han nodded grimly. Having rebels flying at his back had sure been useful lately. His gaze wandered among the half-dozen rebels and 'civilian' friends who remained at this last-night party. "Nobody willing to stay and try a round?"

"Can I try a game?"

It was a new voice, a young voice. Han looked toward the far hatchway with a start of surprise--mingled with pleasure, which he hastily concealed. "Hey, kid, I thought you weren't talkin' to me."

Luke Skywalker shouldered past a fellow X-wing pilot and came to stand by the round table opposite Han. Unlike the other rebels present, he still

sported his military garb. The uniform suited him, and it was obviously a source of pride and pleasure. "No, you said you didn't want to listen to me anymore."

"Same thing, ain't it?" Han paused to exchange farewells with the departing rebels. He gestured behind himself to the half-dozen bottles rimming the back of the banquette. "Drink? Food's over by auxiliary control, if it isn't all gone already."

Luke perched on the tall stool by the table. "What's put you in such a good mood? Leaving us?"

"Whoever said I'd stay, kid? Just because I've stuck around for almost six months doesn't mean I'm committed."

Han frowned at the half-angry, half-distressed look on Luke's face. He tried to tell himself once again that it just wasn't possible for the kid to have a hold on where he went and what he did. Nevertheless, he found himself launching into a slightly defensive explanation. "Look, I owe Jabba the Hutt a lot of money, which is increasing the longer I'm away. I haven't made my debt back from working for you rebels, so I gotta go where people are richer. It's a matter of business, that's all."

"But why now?" Skywalker protested. "If you were only interested in business, you never would have come back to save my neck over the **Death Star**."

Han wished the kid hadn't thrown that in his face. That act had been full of all the motivations--friendship, responsibility, guilt, odd protective feelings, and, of course, a desire to show off--that he was now most eager to ignore. "Do you want to play a game or not?"

Luke glanced from the dice on the table to the foot-high screen dividing the table surface in two. "Sure...but I don't know the rules."

"Oh really?" said Han with a glint of anticipation. "Well, in that case, we won't play for money on the first couple rounds."

"It looks like you've already won enough."

The Corellian shrugged. "It sure isn't enough to pay off Jabba. Game's called 'Liar Dice.' The screen's to keep you from seeing what I've got and vice-versa. You roll your dice--we've each got five of 'em--and then you make a bet on what you've got." He picked up his dice, shook them in one hand, and spilled them out. "Look around the screen. There's three fives, a two and a one. Not so hot. So, if you've got a bad roll, when you make your call, you can lie a little."

"What are the best combinations?" inquired Luke, turning one of the small black cubes from side to side. Each die face was stamped with a different number of silver stars, from one to six.

"Best is five, next four of a kind, then a trey-deuce roll like three twos and two fours. Then ranks high order--6-5-4-3-2, then low order--5-4-3-2-1. After that comes three of a kind, then two pairs, then one pair, and lowest of the low is a runt roll, where nothin' matches."

"Right," said Skywalker. "You want to run that by me again?" Han laughed and did so. "Okay, I think I got it. Now, what do you mean by 'lying a little' about your roll? Sounds like you invented this game."

A laugh sounded behind Luke, and a soft but clear voice commented, "I understand it's played quite frequently aboard Imperial ships. Where Captain Solo might have learned it only he could say."

Luke, brightening, turned quickly toward the newcomer, but Han spoke first. "Why hello, Your Highness," he drawled, with a faintly mocking, challenging smile. "I thought senators--and princesses--weren't supposed to know about gamblin' games."

She attempted a haughty look. "You'd be surprised at what princesses know."

The spacer raised his eyebrows and gave her his best lazy, crooked grin. "Would I really? Educate me."

Only a sudden tightening of her lips indicated her emotional response to this. She replied sarcastically, "I'm afraid I don't have the necessary two or so millennia to devote to that."

"That's what I like about these rebels," remarked Han to no one in particular. "So friendly, so courteous. So complimentary."

"You'd find us much friendlier if you stayed to help," countered Leia.

"Is that some kind of bribe?"

"Must you always put everything in terms of remuneration, Captain?"

She stood, small and indignant, blazing with her own heartfelt convictions. "Yeah," Han said, unable to repress a grin. "I like to watch you get mad."

"Are you going to argue all night or are we going to play a game?" cut in Luke. "Honestly, you

two are about as safe together as fire and fire-works."

Han's grin grew wider as Leia uttered a sound of exasperation. He waved at the dice. "Okay, Luke, let's see how good your luck is."

"Mind if I watch?" Before either of the two men could answer, the princess slipped onto the banquette where she could see what took place on either side of the screen dividing the table.

Han glared, but she merely returned to him that sweet, determined gaze which dared him to remove her bodily from her seat. "No, of course we don't mind," he said sourly. "You can give away the game by reacting at all the wrong moments."

"I'll do my best," she retorted.

"Who goes first?" asked Luke.

"We both roll our dice on our own side of the screen," said Han. "Right of first call switches back and forth between us. I'll call first." He collected his cubes, shook them, and tossed them out on the table. Leia took a quick glance at them, but kept her expression impassive. Luke followed suit with his dice.

"Now, you take a look at what you've got," explained the Corellian. "I'll call three sixes. For betting, I'd usually put ten credits on that to beat anything you'd turn up."

"Then what do I do?"

"Well, you don't know if I've claimed true or false on my roll--I could be exaggerating. You can challenge me anytime by lifting the screen. If I've got what I said I had, you pay me the ten credits. If I lied, you'd get the ten credits. Or, you can make a higher call of your own, and match my bet or raise it. You can also roll again--up to two more times."

"Okay," said Luke. He picked up his cubes and rolled again. His face brightened. "I've got a low order."

Han looked at his young friend's expression, which looked completely guileless. "Okay, I'll roll again." He did so. "You can also keep some of your cubes out--like if you've already got a pair or a three of a kind--and just roll the rest. One more roll for me." He looked up. "Trey-deuce. Better than your order." He withstood Luke's studied gaze for a long moment, but he was confident in his own ability to hide or give things away.

Luke said slowly, "I think I'll challenge." He lifted the screen to reveal Han's three sixes, one four, and one two. "Aha! You lied!"

"You don't have to make it sound treasonous," Han grumbled. "You win, kid. It's as easy as that."

"Yeah," Luke said happily. "Let's try it again."

"Is this your current method of making money, Captain?"

Han shot the princess a look, but her tone and expression were entirely civil. "No--but I can use the cash, Your Highness. Me, Chewie, and the Falcon all have to eat."

She frowned. "What did you do with the reward money we gave to you at Massassi Base?"

Han ignored her question until Luke and he had finished their second round, which concluded in victory for the Corellian. "I didn't know my money was your business," he said, and had the pleasure of seeing her discomfiture. "But--seeing as you're so interested--I'll confess that I spent it all in brothels and boozehells."

Just as her gaze widened into an incredulous, outraged glare, Luke interposed, "Han, you told me the money went for sensor and weaponry upgrades on the Falcon."

"You're just saying that so that Her Worship won't think the worst of me," said Han. "Don't listen to him, Your Majesty. Go ahead and think the worst of me."

Leia looked from Luke, who shook his head in exasperated disbelief, to Han, who couldn't hold back his evil grin any longer. "You--" She bit off something, perhaps an unladylike curseword. Her expression revealed her struggle between aggravation and amusement. After a moment, amusement won. "I think you run your whole life like 'Liar Dice,'" she complained.

Han gave this due consideration. "You might be right," he said, smiling. "Keeps things interesting."

"Don't you care that people might find you unreliable, changeable?"

"Nope." The spacer gave the princess an innocent grin, then pulled down a bottle of tovit from behind his head and popped the lid off. He took a drink right from the bottle. "Say, Luke, you care to put a little money on a few rounds?"

Luke's gaze slid to Leia, but she looked neither approving nor disapproving. "I've never played for money before," he confessed. "I don't really know why people bet on games of chance. They always average out, statistically, in the long run."

"It's the short run that's interesting. Putting money down gives zip to a game, makes you play better."

"Okay."

They played a few careful games, staking five credits each round. Their audience of one behaved in an exemplary fashion, watching but not reacting or commenting. At the end of four rounds, Luke was ten credits richer, and full of the exuberance that comes from winning money for the first time. He was more than willing to continue the game.

They played steadily, pausing only for desultory conversation, food and drink. Luke wanted to know about Corellian spaceship design. Leia asked about Chewie, and Han told her that the Wookiee, already missing this verdant planet they were currently based on, was out either climbing a tree,

sleeping in one, or falling out of one.

The subject of Han's next-day departure did not come up again, and he was grateful. Incongruously, he found himself noticing the things that made leaving so difficult--Luke's idealism and quick intelligence, the princess' knowledge of people and places and her refreshingly tart wit. The pleasure of company, the stimulation of new viewpoints and ideas, the banishment of loneliness. Fuel, Han reminded himself. A fund of memories to fill a spacer's space.

It came as a shock to the Corellian, handing over twenty credits to Luke after a close round, to feel his pile of money so much scantier. He paused to riffle through it--and counted up the paltry sum of one hundred and fifty credits. "Hey, Luke!" he protested. "You been stealing all my cash!"

The young man actually reddened. "I've just been lucky. It goes kinda fast, doesn't it?"

Han looked from his pile of winnings--losings? --to Luke's. "You bet it does!"

"You want to quit?"

"No. I'd rather lose money than go to bed," Han replied. He was startled by his own candor. They'd probably leave if he stopped the game, and Chewie wasn't back yet, and the Falcon had been checked over three times for lift-off. Roaming around an empty, grounded ship was the worst kind of lonely waiting. It was either get drunk or go to bed, neither of which was fun alone. "I'll tell you what, Luke. Double or nothing the next round. Thirty credits."

"Isn't that a little dangerous?" inquired Leia.

"I don't mind." Luke laughed. "This money I've supposedly won doesn't even feel real to me. So why not?"

Han grinned and opened another bottle of tovit. "That's the spirit. My call."

The game was disappointingly fast, from Han's point of view. He claimed a high order. Luke rolled his dice twice, stared incredulously at them for a moment, then looked up with a startled smile and said, "Five of a kind."

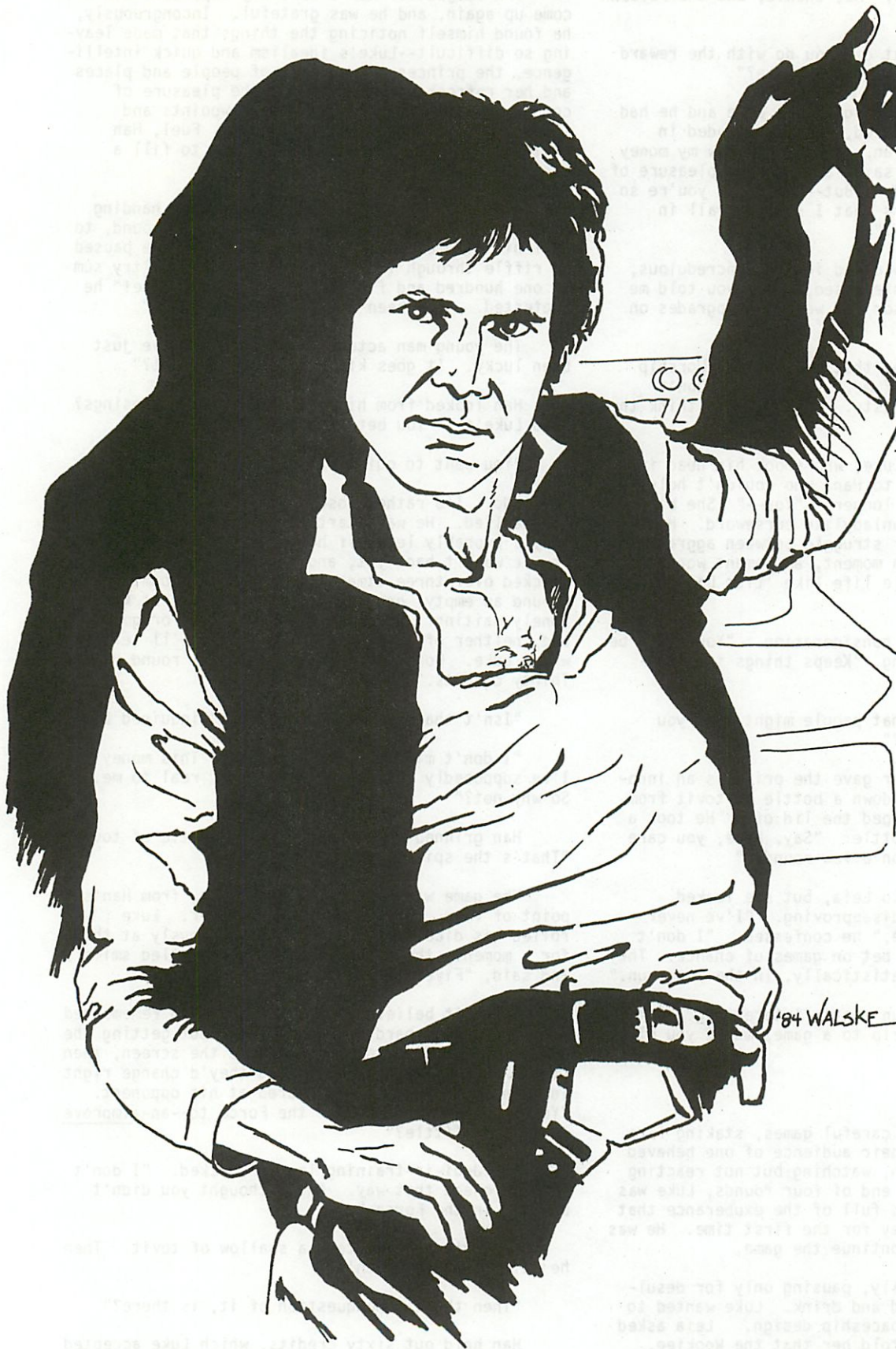
"I don't believe you." Too late Han remembered that Luke would hardly dare to lie about getting the best possible dice roll. He lifted the screen, then stared at the five fours, hoping they'd change right in front of his eyes. He glared at his opponent. "You sure you aren't usin' the Force to--ah--improve the odds a little?"

The Jedi-in-training looked shocked. "I don't need to cheat that way. And I thought you didn't believe in the Force."

Han grimaced and took a swallow of tovit. Then he said dourly, "I don't."

"Then there's no question of it, is there?"

Han held out sixty credits, which Luke accepted with a nod. "Just keep playin'."



'84 WALSKE

But the good luck seemed now to be Skywalker's. Han switched tactics, started playing straight and conservative, but it didn't do him any good. The dice were all against him. Whenever he tried to challenge, all of Luke's seemingly exorbitant calls were true. And the dice were the Corellian's own. Treacherous little beasts.

When Han looked down and saw that he had--barely--twenty credits left on the table beside him, he was appalled. From three hundred credits down to twenty in an hour! For an instant he considered pulling out of the game.

But he rolled again, and any thought of quitting was banished by the wonderful sight of four sixes. He won that round, and the next one too. His stake mounted back up to fifty credits. That was more than enough encouragement for Solo; he didn't even suggest that they stop.

When Han's fifty credits disappeared, he only hesitated a moment, then pulled some money up out of a small pouch on his belt. Technically, it was earmarked for contingencies. A small voice of reason reminded him not to throw good money after bad, but he wasn't in the mood to listen to any reasonable voices. He took fifty credits and reassured himself that the money would go right back in the belt, just as soon as he got it back from Skywalker.

An excellent theory, but one that failed miserably in the execution. Han watched his credits get beheaded with remarkable speed. Guilt, aggravation, and disgust all mingled together in his thoughts. Liberal doses of tovit deadened the feelings, but strengthened his resolve not to surrender.

"I don't believe this!" Luke exulted. "You sure you're not letting me win all this, Han? Almost three hundred and fifty credits!"

"Of course I'm not letting you win," growled the Corellian. "You think I like losing?"

"At least no one can accuse you of cheating," Leia teased. He gave her a glare.

"Do you want to stop?" asked Luke. "I guess that's not fair of me to ask right now--since I'm the one who's ahead. But I'm not trying to bleed you, Han."

"You already have," replied Han curtly. "Of course I don't want to stop."

"But you've only got ten credits left," the princess pointed out.

Han looked at her, and felt reckless pride rise dangerously high in him. "So?"

"I'd take your I-owe-yous," said Luke, "if you weren't leaving."

The careless sarcasm of that stung. Impelled by motives which he didn't care to examine too closely, Han stood up and strode toward a hatchway, commenting over his shoulder that he'd be right back.

He went to his quarters, and opened up the safe-box where a few valuables and the ship's cash were kept. The latter he didn't even think of

touching; that was for fuel and repairs and supplies. The rebel medal he'd been awarded six months previously was also in the box. He pushed that aside and reached into the back of the safe-box. Nothing. No other assets. He remembered selling the last of some valuable nuggets of metal on Kessel and swore softly at the memory of that last, financially and personally disastrous spice run.

The three hundred and fifty-odd credits which Luke had taken from him tonight sure would have proved useful, the cushion that the Corellian needed to rekindle his business. You couldn't make money without money. Unreasoning anger flooded him and he grabbed up the medal, briefly reflecting that it would bring at least two hundred credits on the open market. Slamming the safe-box shut, he pivoted and left.

Halfway back to the bay he was seized by remorse. The medal had its intrinsic monetary value, of course, but that excluded how he'd won it and the singular emotional gratifications of that day of ceremony and celebration. Besides, staking that prize would probably only make his bad luck worse.

He couldn't give up on the game. Not now--three hundred and fifty credits down, simmering in shame and aggravation, watching Luke glow in a kind of bewildered and disbelieving joy, watching Leia silently cheer the young rebel on. His last night had to be a victory, something to wipe away the inevitable small lacerations of leaving. Then he remembered that he still had a source of good luck, and his steps veered toward the cockpit.

Han returned to his ship's central bay. He walked in jauntily and casually tossed two different dice on the table in front of Luke. "Siridium," he said. "Worth at least sixty credits...if you'll accept my word on that."

"Weren't those hanging in the cockpit?"

"Yeah," said the pilot. "They bring me good luck. That's my new stake."

"Okay," said Luke, a little dubiously.

"Were those, perhaps, the dice that you used to win the Falcon?" inquired Leia in a provoking tone.

Han's eyes narrowed. "Whoever said I'd won this ship?"

"Didn't you?"

"None of your business. How--"

"Are we playing or not?" said Luke hastily.

"Just a minute. Count your money or something." The Corellian slowly sat back down, never taking his hard gaze from the princess. She appeared, as ever, sure of herself--and that's what didn't sit right, not right now. "Tell me. How did I acquire this ship?"

"The title indicates that you paid nothing for the vessel but did receive ownership through fair transaction, implying--"

A stray suspicion had now grown into appalling certainty. "Just how much checking up on me have

you done, Your Nosiness?"

"As much as possible," she assured him.

"Don't sound so calm about it!" Han glanced to Luke, who merely looked confused. There was no one to understand the mix of revulsion, pain, and ire seething through him. "What gives you the right to go poking around in what doesn't concern you?"

"The welfare of the many over the few," she answered coolly. "To put it bluntly, your background was checked for our security."

For a moment, Han was speechless. He had thought he could trust these rebels--especially these two--but they, no, she hadn't trusted him. All the bitter angry things he could throw at her quickly passed through the forefront of his thoughts. But-- He looked down at the table and the interrupted play, then took a deep breath to settle his tension. What the hell? He was leaving. Obviously a smart move. Grimly, he said, "It's your call, Luke."

"Huh?" The young man glanced from Han to Leia back to the game. "Right. Sure."

Han tried, but failed, to bring the necessary concentration and intuition to his play. Somehow he was not surprised to find himself steadily losing his favorite, eight-year-old dice. Guilt and bitterness rose in him, and in a moment of reckless injustice he blamed the whole thing on Leia.

As a fourth twenty-credit round went to Luke, the Corellian flippantly tossed his dice to his opponent. "Don't assume that I'm out," he said fiercely, "'cause I'm not." Reaching into his vest pocket, he pulled out the rebellion's medal and let it drop with a heavy clunk onto the table.

Both Luke and Leia were appalled. Leia's righteous anger rose up over Luke's protests. "Does that mean so little to you that you're willing to gamble it away? Or do you want to get rid of it because you dislike being reminded of your own act of valor? I'm surprised you've kept it this long!"

"Don't stake that, Han," Luke said unhappily. "This is just a game. That medal's a lot more important."

Their anger and his helped to wash away any lingering doubts or remorse. "It's just a lump of metal," growled Han, "that happens to be worth money. Look, we'll make it real fast. I call that about two hundred credits. Two rounds, betting one hundred creds each time."

"I don't believe this," said Leia.

"Han, I can't keep playing. Not if you're going to--"

"It looks pretty lousy for the winning side to try and quit the game," the spacer said menacingly. "What do you care, kid? It's my property. Besides, I don't expect to lose it! C'mon, let's get it over with. What's the matter? You scared to take the risk?"

Luke looked both irritated and pained. Leia was shaking her head and glaring at Han with

disbelief and furious disappointment. Han felt his own emotions running dangerously high, dangerously close to spilling over violently. When no one said or did anything, he brought his fist down on the table, causing the other two and the dice to jump. "C'mon!"

Leia and Luke exchanged swift glances full of anxiety. "Take it easy, Han," said the young man placatingly. "If you really feel that strongly about it, okay. I certainly can't stop you."

"Right," Han said belligerently. "Your call."

The first game went to Luke, and Han experienced a moment of bitter fear. The second ended in a tie. The third game went the slowest, but it was finally won. By Luke.

Without a word, Han reached around the screen and put the heavy medal, its ribbon folded beneath it, on top of Luke's hoard. Luke watched him in a kind of disbelieving daze. Leia reached forward and touched the award as if to ascertain its reality. Then she raised her head, her eyes turning to Han, her expression filled with revulsion and rage.

The Corellian stared down at the table. He didn't need to look at the princess' angry eyes or Luke's dismayed ones to understand the enormity of what had just happened.

He sneaked a look at the pile by Skywalker. There, sitting on top of the heap of cash, were his lucky dice and the medal. They mocked him. Though not a superstitious man in the least, Han suddenly felt that leaving without those two prizes in particular would be the stupidest, verging possibly on the suicidal, action he'd ever take.

Beaten by a fresh kid from Tatooine who--three hours earlier--didn't even know how to play the game! Han drained his bottle of tovit. How had his wild good luck given out so fast and so irretrievably? Why had he staked so much? He hated the thought of telling Chewie what he'd lost--not that the Wookiee would disapprove, because he wouldn't, but admitting defeat openly always made Han's conscience attack him with a vengeance. He didn't even like to gamble. He just did it occasionally, when riding a lucky hunch. Damn it to hyperspace and back! What now?

Luke's voice, quiet and firm, interposed. "I really can't take this, Han. Not the money, not your dice--and especially not your medal."

Self-directed wrath made Han lash out harder than he'd expected or wanted. "If I won all that off of you, I'd keep it! I don't want any of your charity. A bet's a bet. That's the way it goes."

"But--"

The Corellian felt his control slipping. "Stow it!"

"Damn it, Han, I won't take your medal!"

"You'll take it if I have to wrap it around your head!"

"Stop it!" Leia commanded. The note of unmistakable authority in her voice quieted them both.

"You're both behaving stupidly. Luke, take your winnings. Han, calm down. I think the game had better stop here."

Luke looked beseechingly at the angry Corellian. "Unless you want to try to win it back..."

"What with?" Han asked bitterly. "I don't have any money."

"Does that mean you can't leave?" Leia asked incredulously.

"I didn't say that," he retorted swiftly. "I just won't be able to go as far as I wanted. But that's my business and none of yours." He thought of his meager reserves and wondered how soon he'd have to bribe an Imperial official or pay for a repair job. He and Chewie would find a way to pull through, he reminded himself. They always had before.

Luke sighed deeply. "I don't like this." He rose from his seat, but then stood, irresolute, by the table.

"That makes two of us, but so what?" scoffed Han. Even he, in spite of his ire, winced at the sound of his truculence, so he added, on a softer note, "You played a good game, kid, and the luck went with you. I'll make it back some other way."

The young man scowled, opened his mouth as if to speak, then looked down and turned away. Han studied his friend's shoulders, which were eloquent of despondence. He felt Leia watching him, so he marshaled his expression into stone-faced reserve and glanced over to meet her gaze. She was the first to look away, her eyes lowering in pain and disappointment.

Han wished he could ignore the bitter emotions sweeping the Falcon's bay. No longer angry, all he felt was frustrated and empty. He berated himself, trying to regain his balance. The money sure as hell didn't matter, because money was gossamer in its transience and dependability. Lucky dice? He made his own luck. The medal? What good would it do him, especially if he got boarded again by Imperials? Something whispered he was about to lose far more than those material items, something rare and of incalculable value, but he drove the whisper away, denying its existence.

Leia moved to the hatchway, and after a moment, Luke followed her. At the entryway he stopped and turned around. "Thanks for teaching me the game," he said with rueful courtesy. "I just wish there was a way for you to win everything back, so we could both go away feeling better."

Han, touched by this well-meant honesty, spread his hands wide. "Nothin' to stake, Luke."

Luke shook his head apologetically. Then his form tensed into an instant's immobility, and sudden hope returned to his face. He stood still, his gaze turned inward, obviously lost in consideration.

"I just thought of something you could stake," said Skywalker. There was a strange tone in his voice, as if he were torn between reluctance and desire to speak his mind.

"Yeah, what?" Han said irritably. Why couldn't they just go away and be done with it?

"Your departure."

"Huh?"

Leia looked at Luke in wild surmise. The young man walked slowly back to the table and faced Han squarely. He was purposeful and to the point. "I don't want you to leave tomorrow. Jabba's nothing but a greasy criminal who'll extort every credit you have for the next twenty years. The Imperials are swarming all over space, and you're just not gonna be able to go back to the kind of business you ran before. I know you like high risk, but I think you'll find that people are running scared. Your contacts'll dry up, and the money just won't be there for the making."

"I like the way you know all about my line of business," Han cut in, savagely. "Why don't you just let me go about my own life?"

"I won't stop you from doing anything you want," Luke replied. He didn't sound in the least bit ruffled or hurt by the Corellian's acerbity, just intent and sincere. "I'd just like you to stay. I like you, I admire you, and I'll miss you a lot if you're gone. So will a lot of other people, including all those rebels you've been giving extra pilot training to."

He held up his hands as Han tried to speak. "Let me finish. I'm not trying to put any extra pressure on you--I just want you to know where I stand. To make it fair, let's have another game, or best three out of four if you like. If you win, you take back all your money, your dice, and your medal. I win--and you stay with us, with the rebellion."

Han's jaw dropped. So did Leia's. "Kid," Han said finally, "you have the soul of a gambler."

Luke winced, apparently not believing that to be an asset. He shifted restlessly. "How about it?"

"This is ridiculous," Leia cut in. "I'd like the Captain to stay, too, but making it part of a bet is deplorable! It's like gambling with your life."

Han, who'd been more than half inclined to refuse Skywalker's crazy suggestion, turned to her and grinned. "I like the way you put that, Your Highness. Sit down, Luke. Best two out of three--and may the best liar win."

Luke looked sharply at Han as if to make sure the Corellian was serious. Then he nodded once and pulled out the stool again.

Leia remained by the hatchway a moment longer, but a natural desire to see the outcome obviously prevailed. She came back slowly, while Luke and Han were collecting their dice, and slid back onto her seat on the banquette.

The first game went rapidly. Han rolled a high four of a kind, and even though Luke took his two extra rolls to improve his chances, he couldn't come close. Han refrained from commenting on the young

man's change of luck, but he smiled with left corner of mouth turned well up and decided he was glad to have accepted the challenge.

Next call was Luke's. He stared down at the cubes on his side of the screen. Han took the opportunity to glance at Leia, who obviously had seen the roll. But she was impassive--aside from a set to her mouth and jaw indicating her irritation.

"C'mon, junior, I thought you had to get up early in the morning."

"High order," said Luke.

"Yeah? I've got a trey-deuce."

Luke looked vaguely unhappy, and Han took another long look at his roll. His call wasn't quite as good as he'd declared, and he had a funny feeling--based on what had been happening all evening--that his opponent might be about to challenge. All of a sudden, against all his normal inclinations, he wished for a quick end, no matter what the outcome.

Luke rolled his dice--two of them, from the sound--again. Then for the third and last time. "Four of a kind," he said, in a quiet, satisfied, inarguable tone.

Han considered the options. He couldn't tell when the kid was lying, and on most of the occasions he had challenged, he'd been the one to lose. Best to roll again--which he did. A third roll brought him up to a middle of the road trey-deuce. "Four of a kind--fours," he said unhesitatingly.

"But mine are fives," replied Luke with a smile.

Nothing left but to challenge or surrender. For the first time in his gambling days the Corellian considered giving in. He could afford to lose a round, after all. Then all his better instincts rose up, and, almost angrily, he demanded, "Let's see those fives."

"Sorry, Han." Luke lifted the screen.

Han gazed at the evidence, then shrugged. "Even up. Last round settles it, Luke."

"I know it," came the steady response. "Better start looking forward to losing."

"This is absurd," broke in Leia. "Luke, I can't believe you're encouraging this. Han, how can you possibly decide this on chance? You're staking some credits and--and a few pieces of metal against a way of life!" She turned from an expressionless Corellian to her fellow rebel. "Luke, don't you see that he shouldn't be forced into staying? The rebellion doesn't want unwilling draftees."

Luke looked taken aback, but answered gamely, "Well, we can't afford to pay him at his uh previous business standard, and he won't listen to personal appeals from his friends. I didn't force him into this; I just gave him a different option." His gaze moved to Han, and he added awkwardly, "But if you want out, say so, and I won't say another word about your...comings and goings."

"Anybody who walks out in the middle of a bet'll turn coward in a fight," said Han automatically. "We'll play it through to the end." He studied Leia, who looked defiant and adamant. "My way of life is mine to do with as I please, Princess. And if I lose--a bet's a bet, and I'll honor it. I won't be unwilling."

Both of them stared at him as if he'd just evinced a desire to meet Darth Vader in person. The smuggler arched his eyebrows and asked blandly, "You two practicing to catch flying bugs?"

Luke sighed. "One more round it is, then."

They started again. Luke earnestly, moodily shook his dice and then spilled them across his side of the table.

Han opened his hands and dropped the cubes. "Two pairs," he said, truthfully but unenthusiastically.

Luke's call was equally subdued. "Three of a kind."

The spacer picked up three of his dice, then discovered he didn't much care what he might roll. He frowned at this. He had known his heart and mind weren't married to this last game, but he was surprised by the number of times--three now--that part of him had voiced its disinterest. Why had he agreed to this, anyway? And why had Luke--and the princess, that was a surprise--waited so long to show how badly they wanted him to stick around?

Han rolled the dice. He now had a fairly good trey-deuce, a play that almost begged him to prevaricate a little. He felt like playing it safe, though, so he merely looked up and claimed his new roll.

Luke's spirits had vanished, a condition alien to the young man. He picked up only two of his cubes and shook them, letting them go with a despondent toss. He scowled and tried again, then looked disbelievingly at his dice. He raised his head slowly and looked at Han with a half-laughable, half-painful mixture of grim pride, anxiety, and angry yearning. "I've got five of a kind. Five threes."

That was it, then. Defeat was almost unavoidable. Han knew better than to challenge a claim of that sincerity. He looked down at his paltry trey-deuce, trying to remember the odds of improving that to a high five of a kind. Chancy. It occurred to him, now that he was so close to losing, to wonder why Luke so obviously didn't want to win anymore. Ironic. Especially ironic, given how he felt likewise.

"Are you going to roll again, Han?" Luke asked gently.

"Why not?" retorted the Corellian, sardonically. He looked at his three fives, picked up the two ones, shook them with ostentatious zest, and let go. He almost didn't want to look. Then trepidation turned to disbelief, and he glanced again at the two new fives and then quickly covered the five fives with his hand.

It was too much. The troops coming over the hill, the sudden friend at your side in a lonely alley fight, the fifty credits found when you were hanging onto life by your teeth. Suddenly he knew that leaving was like walking right back into all those life-and-death situations. But no one would be there to show up in the nick of time.

The realization--the decision and the conviction--had surged forth as swiftly as the change of the dice. Han closed his hand on them and picked them up, obliterating the evidence forever. Then he lifted an expression free of care or conscience to his friend and said simply, "You win, Luke."

A brief, startled movement at his side, and Han remembered the princess. Leia, who'd sat quietly watching, observing both sides, throughout tonight's play. He turned his head to face her squarely.

Her eyes were wide, faintly questioning, but her expression gave away nothing of what she'd seen. Han stared at her, daring her to make something of his deed. After a moment, she breathed deeply and said softly, "You accept your loss very well, Captain. My compliments."

Luke looked puzzled by this exchange. He stood up. "Han, I don't know whether I'm sorry or I'm glad--probably both." He glanced down at his winnings with a faint, wry smile. "I wonder. Was the

Force with me--or against you?"

Han felt almost lightheaded, as the ramifications of his split-second action began to hit him. He had just committed himself. He couldn't leave. Chewie wouldn't mind--the Wookiee liked these people lots better than he liked Jabba--but he would think his human was crazy. That might be right. What had he done? Luke had his money, his dice, his medal ...and his freedom. He'd surrendered. Voluntarily.

"Han?" Leia's voice, with a new, surprisingly gentle tone in it. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," he replied. Actually, he was. Perfectly all right. He wasn't leaving. Why should that make him suddenly feel so...so effervescent, as if laughter were about to bubble out of him? Ridiculous. "I'm just weighing what I lost...against what I'm supposedly gaining."

"You might find you like it here with us," said Luke.

Leia nodded and smiled warmly at Han. "Yes, I think you'll find there are some perquisites, Captain."

He favored her with his own, inscrutable smile. "I certainly hope so, Your Highness. I certainly hope so." *



I CAN'T SEE A
THING IN THIS
HELMET!



THAT'S 'CUZ YOU HAVE
IT ON BACKWARDS,
KID!



AmP
8/10/14

CAILEAN

Jedi are star-children, Cai.
so my gentle, greeneyed teacher said,
and smiled,
while I craned to search the jeweled sky,
all childhood's yearning in round blue eyes,
to see fond, parental faces there,
so I dreamt.

Jedi are fire-children, Cai.
this my sadeyed warrior-tutor taught,
and watched
as I touched to shimmering laser fire
eager and hesitant all at once,
that blazing sword when given,
marked my boyhood's end,
so I laughed.

Jedi are Life's children, Cai.
so my somber, cleareyed master told,
and grieved
as my generation fell,
each one beautiful and brave and fool,
thinking to heal the galaxy,
dying for beings who called us:
'hardly men at all,'
so I wept.

Jedi will be our child, Cai.
this my darkeyed, wondrous lady foretold,
and knew,
as I twined my being with hers,
beneath stars, beside fires, before life's call,
we were joyous and afraid and loving enough
to make ourselves
and our galaxy new,
so I lived.

Ronni Sacksteder

Author's Note: Jedi Cailean Skywalker is Luke's father in the framework of as yet unwritten SW prequel fiction. His lady is Jehan Merete, his first teacher Osa K'loss, his first sabre instructor Milcho Meh, and his master Ben Kenobi. Cailean (Cai=Kye, lean=lane) is not and will not become Lord Vader.

Authors' comments: We've gotten tired of all the 'Luke-is-as-innocent-as-a-newborn-babe' stories and opinions. Come on, now! The "kid" is 23 years old, has a high rank, is a hero, has a hint of unknown and mysterious powers, and his face is hardly one to crack mirrors. Keeping in mind that this needs be at best a PG rating, we still think that we can tell you that,

The Commander's Bed is Never Cold*

Phyllis Johypoll and Geraldine Stout

*(even on Hoth!)

Secure in the knowledge that he was unseen, Luke was enjoying his view of Han's 'dialogue' with Chewbacca as the two attended to needed repairs on the Falcon. Just as he was about to join them, Chewbacca almost lost his footing on top of the ship and dropped the welding laser.

"Ieeeyeeowch!" Han grabbed his arm and doubled over in obvious pain. While he had often complained about the cold on Hoth, warming up by way of a near miss by a welding laser obviously wasn't his preferred method.

Chewbacca yelped an abject apology. Turning his eyes upward toward the Wookiee who stood on top of the Millennium Falcon, Han snarled, "Well, if you'd just watch where you're aiming that damned thing, we might finish these repairs on schedule. Not to mention without serious injury!" he added sarcastically.

//I'm just as tired as you are!// the Wookiee retorted. Luke was glad to see--or rather, to hear--that his hours of practice with the Wookiee language were serving him well. He could make out Chewbacca's words clearly. //If you would just LISTEN when I warn you...sometimes I think humans were born deaf!//

"Medic!" Han called, ignoring the Wookiee's comments.

Luke started forward to help the Corellian, then paused once more when he noticed that the medic on watch was a lovely woman who strode with a regal bearing. "Let me see that arm, clumsy!" she snapped.

"Why, Your Royal Whateverness, what're you doing down here with us common working folk?" Han grinned wickedly.

Princess Leia Organa glared at him. "I double up on assigned tasks just like everyone else! If you weren't so insistent on getting these repairs done immediately, Chewbacca wouldn't have been this tired, and wouldn't have slipped. And YOU might have heard his warning, and not gotten injured."

Luke listened to Leia's words appreciatively, then glanced at the Corellian. Han had cocked his head to one side, and was smiling ingratiatingly. "I never thought I'd hear such concern in your voice."

"It isn't concern for you," she responded. "It's concern for the amount of time your unthinking carelessness is costing us in the construction of this base! Now, hold out your arm, and try not to cry when I spray on the antiseptic bandage."

"If I cry, Your Holy Princessness, it'll be because of the pain you're causing to my heart, not my arm."

"Shut up and take this like a man," the princess snapped. "And stop trying to bait me; it won't work!"

"I noticed," Han said, then added, "This planet would be a lot warmer if you'd thaw out some."

"You only get what you deserve, CAPTAIN. You'd better have one of the medical 'droids look at that." Leia finished applying the bandage, and turned to walk away.

"Hey!" Han complained. "Aren't you goin' to ask if I feel better? Kiss my boo-boo? Something nice and touching to keep up troop morale?"

"I'd rather kiss the Falcon," she shot back over her shoulder. "And if YOU care about troop morale, cut out the self-centered behavior. We need devoted rebels here. A giddy ne'er-do-well is not my idea of the ideal man."

"Ne'er-do-well?" Han muttered. "Not sure I like that description. I STAYED, didn't I?" He stopped when he realized that Luke was standing under this ship only a few paces away and was grinning at his reactions. "I think her Royalness had an ulterior motive in choosing Hoth," Han said. "She wants everyone to know what she feels like!"

Luke shook his head in good-natured disgust

and started toward his quarters. Chewbacca called out a hasty good-night. Han echoed his co-pilot's words, and Luke waved back acknowledgment. Chewbacca grinned knowingly, a grin which Luke returned, tiredly, as he turned aside once more. Just before he left the hangar, he heard Han say quietly, "Luke'd be a lot happier if he weren't so damn innocent. That torch--or lightsaber, or whatever--that he's carrying for the Royal Personage Himself must get awfully heavy, sometimes."

Luke glanced back through the hangar door. Catching his eye, Chewbacca snorted, slid down off the top of the ship, patted Han on the head with some condescending noises, and headed out the nearest corridor. Han, not glancing over at Luke, scratched his head. "One of these days, I'm gonna corner Chewie and ask him just what the hell's goin' on!"

Smiling, Luke continued toward his quarters. It was obvious to him that both Han Solo and the princess were hiding something from themselves, as well as from everyone else. And, he knew, they were taking great pains to hide it from him. He'd made a tactical error in giving the impression that he was in love with Leia when he'd first joined the rebellion. He'd been awfully young then, but she'd come to expect it by now, as had Han. Just as they sublimated their mutual attraction, Luke felt honor-bound to keep up the pretense of his own infatuation. Everyone seemed to expect it. Well, a lot of people did... 'the Princess and the Jedi'... He sighed.

Just then, a young woman in a junior officer's uniform approached him in the corridor. "Commander Skywalker?" she asked shyly. "I was wondering if I might have a conference with you."

Luke stifled an urge to groan. He was too tired to deal with this tonight. "Look, Miss...I don't have any time to spare tonight for a long discussion. Perhaps some other time."

"But, Commander, I was hoping I'd be trained on the X-wing fighter, and the papers just never seem to come through. I thought that maybe we could... talk...about how to speed up the process."

Luke knew what THAT meant. "Go see Wedge Antilles," he suggested. "Tell him I sent you. He'll help you get the paperwork straightened out." He turned, and walked away quickly.

Two turns further down, another woman came up to him. "Hello, Luke! You're just who I'm looking for...do you have some time to...ah...talk a few things over with me tonight?"

He sighed, "Lyda, I'm really tired. Some other time, okay?"

She shrugged, then patted him on the arm. "I tried!" Lyda smiled again, then sauntered down the corridor.

He had not gone more than four steps when yet another young woman found her way to his side. "Commander Skywalker? My name is Melesa. We've never met. I just joined the rebellion four months ago, and I've heard so many stories about you, and what happened at Yavin, and...well...I've never met

a hero before. What's it LIKE being the hero of the rebellion?"

Luke tried to hide his impatience. "I'm really too tired to spend any time going over my supposed heroics," he said. "If you want to hear a colorful version of the story, you'll find Han Solo working on his ship out in bay #7. HE's the real hero, anyway; I was only another pilot. Just don't tell him I sent you to speak to him. He likes his storytelling to be spontaneous."

Melesa looked at Luke for a long moment, then walked toward the docking bays, muttering something which Luke could barely make out. It was something about the princess.

Luke shook his head, resuming his walk toward his quarters. A warm arm slipped through his as a redhead joined him. "Luke? You look like you've been through another briefing with the Princess. Want some company for a while?"

"No, Sybil, but thanks for the offer. I'm exhausted, and I have to go out on an early patrol tomorrow. All I want to do is relax for a few hours."

She murmured sympathetically, "I can get some spice wine and rub your back. Chewbacca bumped into me and told me you looked like you could use some quiet listening-to."

"I could use an understanding ear turned on me for a while," he agreed, while mentally throwing a salute in the Wookiee's direction. "And the spice wine sounds good. So does the back rub. But I don't have the energy for anything else. I just spent three hours in a command meeting--one with Leia presiding--and it only broke up a half hour ago, on top of four hours of patrol duty. PLUS I just had to fend off two complete strangers of the female variety. Not to mention that Lyda wanted to 'talk' something over, and you know what THAT means!"

"Lyda, again!" Sybil laughed. "Luke, you'll have to turn her over to Han Solo for your own good!"

"Are you getting jealous?" he asked, smiling.

"What? ME jealous?" Sybil grinned. "I know you too well for that, Luke Skywalker. I'm farm-bred, myself. It's not me you have to worry about; it's Leia. How do you think she'll feel when she finds out that the simple farm-boy-turned-Jedi who supposedly worships the ground she walks on is actually...how shall I put this politely..."

"Keeping company with?" Luke suggested, chuckling. "That IS what you were about to refer to, wasn't it?"

Sybil's chuckle echoed his. "Yes, thank you... 'keeping company with' at least three other women, and three-quarters of the female population of this base is trying to beat their way into his quarters?"

They had reached Luke's door, and he opened it to step into his living area. Sybil remained outside. "I'll go get some of that spice wine," she told him, and left.

She was back quickly. Luke had pulled off his uniform and was slouched in a chair, clad in his Tatooine farm clothes.

"I must admit that you do look innocent when you dress like that," Sybil told him as she poured a glass of the wine. "Anyway, have you thought about what you'll do if and when the Princess finds out that you don't love her exclusively?"

He took a sip of wine, then smiled. "I'll just tell her the truth; she's a beautiful woman, and she's intelligent, and she's a great asset to the rebellion, if not its most important member. But I can't imagine spending any large part of my life with her. Sybil, I may be over-sensitive, but the very thought of spending any length of time alone with Leia..."

"And true love usually does lead to an enormous amount of time spent alone in one sort of room or another!"

Luke grimaced. "I think having Jedi training has certain detrimental effects. THAT in particular would tax my strength beyond any normal bounds.

Just thinking about it tires me out! Sybil, that woman never relaxes! It's like listening to a live wire sizzle with no ground, and she has more emotional ups and downs than any three people that I know...except, perhaps, Han Solo. It's impossible to keep track of which direction his moods are coming from!"

"They DO make a lovely couple, don't they?"

"Yeah. I wish that they'd realize it, so I could stop joining them in this charade."

"By the way, Luke," Sybil said, as she moved behind him to start massaging his shoulders, smiling at his sigh of comfort. "I saw a very pretty little girl by the name of Melesa talking to Han a few minutes ago. She wouldn't be one of the 'strangers of the female variety' you mentioned earlier?"

Luke tipped his head back to look up at her and snickered. "Han really thinks that every woman here is just dying to crawl into his berth. I figured I'd give him a hand. It might make Leia jealous enough to..." ✱



WHEN HAN SAID JABBA WAS AN
OBNOXIOUS SLUG, I DIDN'T KNOW
HE MEANT IT LITERALLY!



MONOLOGUE

Hey Leia, come over here.

Aw, come on! What do you think I can do with all this stuff attached to my arm--

afraid I'll finish what I started the last time we were aboard the Falcon together?

Sorry to disappoint you, Your Worshipfulness, but there are parts of me that haven't thawed out yet.

Yeah, I am feeling better.

I'm sorry I missed all the excitement back on Tatooine.

That must have been some fight!

When Lando and the kid sweet-talked their way

into Jabba's place, Jabba was still trying

to make up his mind about whether to

use me as a hat-rack in his hall, or a

towel rack in the men's room. He said he

was going to get his money's worth outa' me

somehow. Yeah, real funny. Willya' stop laughing?!

Lando says he tried to talk Jabba into playing

cards with me as the stakes, and Luke was

trying to use the Force to influence him,

but Chewie got a little impatient because

they made him wait outside.

I keep telling people it ain't wise to upset a

Wookiee. They tell me that between Chewie's fists,

Lando's blaster and Luke's lightsaber, they're still finding

bits of Jabba's men scattered all over the scenery

between Mos Eisley and Tosche station.

Too bad Jabba got away. He's more slippery

than a Barian Slime Crawler.

So what about you and me?

It's amazing how fast your mind works in the second

before you think you're gonna' die.

I thought I'd never see you again.

I feel a lot different about things now--

maybe ready for something permanent.

No, you don't have to answer right away.

I know the rebellion is more important to you

than your personal life--at least for now.

And there's the kid to consider. I know you feel

something special for him, too.

Yeah, I'll give you time. I've got all the time

in the world, now.

Before you leave, I have to tell you something.

I love you.

You know?! What's that supposed to mean?

Cathie Whitehead

Prologue to a Quest

Pat Nussman

He was the despair of her days, the longing of her nights, the sun and the moon, the alpha and the omega.

He was gone.

Dr. Christine Chapel bent over the lab terminal, allowing her unbound hair to cover her face, hiding it from any chance gaze. This was foolishness. He had been an intelligent man, a gentle soul, a fine commander, a--yes--a great being.

But he had never been hers. She had accepted that long ago.

After the five-year mission, she had picked up her life again, determined to turn her back on foolish, schoolgirl longings and dreams. She was a woman grown, not an adolescent to moon over the unobtainable.

And she was tired. Tired of the sneers and barely concealed laughter that followed the revelation of her feelings. Not from him, of course, but from the others, the humans who were all too willing to forget their own failings in mocking at weakness in others.

So she left the *Enterprise*, entered medical school, received her M.D., found honors showered on her for original research.

But, inevitably, she was drawn back here, to space, to the *Enterprise*, where, despite the pain or perhaps because of it, she had lived more intensely than ever before or since, and not just because of Spock. She had, she believed, pushed him to the periphery of her mind, a faint, bittersweet memory.

Then he was more than memory. He returned, on the V'ger mission, more magnificent than ever in her--she must admit it, it was true--still besotted eyes. She revealed too much of herself in that first, incredulous moment of joy. Afterward, she swiftly retreated into herself once more, told herself that romance was for children, became again the complete scientist, the tender physician, with all compassion for other people and none for herself.

She avoided Spock.

Even when the *Enterprise* became a training ship and Spock its captain. She saw him only when

consulted on some medical manner and, even then, she kept her emotions shuttered behind a cool facade of professionalism. She was, she told herself wryly, becoming more Vulcan than the Vulcan.

Then came this mission, beginning so innocently as a training voyage with the Admiral aboard, turned by the madman Khan into a flight of tragedy. So many dead.

Including him.

Strange that these years of longing and bitter-sweet pain should end like this. Despite the dangers of space, somehow she had never expected it.

A pair of warm hands closed over her shoulders.

"Chris."

She turned to face McCoy's recently aged face. The mobile lips attempted a smile, but the effort ended in failure. Chris slipped her arms around him, enfolding him in a mutually comforting embrace. McCoy, too, had lost a friend, dearer, perhaps, than he had ever realized.

"We're almost back at base." He seemed to be using the prosaic comment as a break to the emotional silence that enclosed them.

Chris nodded, her head still on McCoy's shoulder. "Would you care to be more precise about our arrival time, Doctor?" she mocked deliberately.

"I'm a doctor, not a computer." His voice failed to make the phrase a real joke. The loss was too new. They still remembered a man whose mind worked with the precision of a computer.

Her own computations appeared again in her mind. No, she wouldn't tell McCoy--it would be too cruel to arouse his hope now. First she would talk to Dr. Marcus, show her the figures worked out so painfully the past few nights.

The computations pointed to the possibility. A definite possibility. Even Jim, she heard, had spoken of it, but as a distant hope. Chapel's figures, along with Carol Marcus' machine, made the hope a little closer.

But that was her secret, and if the figures

were correct, her duty. Spock might not understand that, but even an unrequited love carried with it certain responsibilities.

Or maybe Spock would understand. As his last moments proved, he knew duty very well. And perhaps more than a little about love.

No, she couldn't tell Len, allow him--or herself--to hope. Not now, when there was only a spark to call by that name. She could only plan.

"Len." She pulled back from his embrace. "I need to take a leave of absence."

McCoy nodded. "I understand."

He didn't, but she let it go.

"An indefinite one. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

Len took her hand and patted it gently. "It'll be taken care of, Chris."

She watched him leave the room, then thrust her hand deep into the pocket of her lab coat, touching the printout stashed there. Now or never. She exited the room briskly. Dr. Marcus should be in her cabin about now.

Behind her, the still-activated computer glowed with the figures of death. And life.

He wouldn't be hers, still. But, perhaps, just perhaps, he would be. ★



A Fleeing Triumph

The governor's gaunt, spectral figure exuded a grimly joyous anticipation. His greatest moment, the epitome of years' cold, merciless scheming/tyrannical rule, was about to take place. The holocaust that had been Alderaan was already to his credit. Destruction of the rebel base would assure his favored place in the Empire's bloody, corrupt eyes. Fleshless fingers wove into repetitious patterns. Obsidian eyes burned with fiery calculation. Contemptuously he rejected the cautionary suggestion of a ready escape route. These puny X-wings with their youthful pilots were no threat to his magnificent Death Star. Breathing deeply, he gave the final destruction-dealing order. With every cell and sinew of his form he concentrated on the viewscreen. Viciously, abruptly his world tilted and chaos reigned as supreme master. For one pain-drenched second Tarkin felt as if he was being wrenched in a hundred flame-colored directions. Then he and his obscene creation became as one with the endless void of space.

Sarah Leibold

SANCTUARY

DEBORAH JUNE LAYMON
DEBORAH KAY GOLDSTEIN

Han deliberately turned his back on Luke. He found a rag and began to wipe his gloves before taking them off--"don't go into the comps with dirty hands"--hoping the kid would take the hint, drop the subject, and go get himself lost. But, Luke didn't take the hint in quite the way Han meant it.

"All right, fine, okay, have it your way, Han, you usually do. If that's the way you feel," Luke sighed, "I'll do it myself then." He turned to leave.

Han didn't stop to think--his hand simply shot out and he collared Luke. "What the hell do you mean, you'll do it? You may be a Jedi, but-- Kid, you don't know the first--blessed thing about being a priest! They'd have you pegged before you got through morning prayers--" He snorted at his own phrasing. "Morning prayers, hell, you wouldn't even know what evening bell means!"

"Don't call me 'kid.' And what do you know about monasteries that makes you such an expert?"

"Damn it!" Irritated, Han pitched the greasy rag across the docking bay. "I was raised in one, I was taking vows--" He stopped.

Luke's face purpled with suppressed emotion.

Han threatened the kid with a finger and a menacing scowl. (Father Fias, I always knew you were gonna get me in trouble.) "One wrong word, kid, just one wrong word..."

Skywalker put both hands up, and even though his face was still purple, and his voice quivering with what was probably laughter, he sounded remarkably somber when he answered. "I didn't mean anything by it, Han. It's none of my business if you were going to be a monk. Will you try to look at it from our point of view? We're nearly broke, and the Don monastery has tapes that show the location of the old Republic caches--and they won't give us the information because it will ruin their precious neutrality."

"Watch your mouth, kid."

"I can't say anything to you today, can I? Never mind, don't answer that."

Han couldn't quite figure out what to do with his hands, but he knew he didn't want to look at Luke's troubled, honest face. "So why're you broke? Her Worshipfulness can't stick to a budget?" The venom that he used to be able to manage where Leia was concerned wouldn't come now.

"Budgets haven't a thing to do with moving four bases in four years. And all the equipment, all the men we lose when we have to evacuate--" Luke shrugged, and then added, with a sharpness that surprised the Corellian, "If you think you can do it better and cheaper, we're perfectly willing to give you the job."

"Don't bite my head off."

"I said I'd do it. I'd hate to interrupt your business."

Han glanced at him in surprise. "You're not-- Luke, you don't know what you're asking me to do."

"I'm asking you to help us out."

"You're asking me to lie to an Abbot, steal from monks, break every goddamned rule in the book-- Look, let me think about it, will you?"

Luke cocked his head to one side, his blue eyes narrowed, and he sounded hesitant. "Well, Han, we don't have much time--"

"I have to think! It won't take much time."

The kid shrugged, and for the first time Han saw an actual smile on his face. "Okay, okay. I'll let you think. Just make up your mind quick, huh? If you don't want to do it, I'll have to go and find someone who can give me a course in being a monk."

Han cuffed him, and growled, "Will you go on and get yourself lost?"

Luke did.

It had been a long time since he'd thought about the monastery. Or wanted to, for that matter-- Or to think about Corelli. And that last time had been when he and Giors and Rey and 'Shannah had shipped out as least-hands on an old frigate bound for the CentreWorlds. How long had it been? Four--no, three, not even three years after the monastery had been-- Hell, it had seemed longer. On the streets you grew up fast. Even little monk-raised boys, too dumb to live...

The Empire had demanded some information from the monks.

He had resented not being old enough to sit in on the great meeting the brothers held, had resented being fourteen and a year away from declaring as a novice. But he had listened eagerly to some of the younger novices who were proud of their new status and hinted that the Empire wanted information about weapons, old weapons that the Republic had used once, information in the comps about space stations as big as planets and movable.

But he had been in the room, holding the obsolete inkblock as the Old Abbot dipped and scratched an obsolete pen and scripted a reply on parchment, with florid capitals and formal language. "The Brothers of Knowledge answer to the Auctor Himself and must therefore respectfully decline His Imperial Majesty's request."

Except, of course, that it hadn't been a request.

A brief rap on the main gate a week later, and the gatekeeper went to answer. The door burst open, throwing him backward; his head hit the ground with a sickening crack, and went sideways at a grotesquely twisted angle, like a forgotten puppet. Men in white suits swarmed like invading ants through the abbey, forcing the monks away from the computers, herding them into the garden.

The monks looked glassy-eyed, some bruised or bleeding, some supporting those who could no longer stand. And a stone-faced man in dull grey stalked up to the Abbot.

"All right, old man, I want to know where it is."

"My son, I have already said we cannot--"

Like a pistol-shot, the grey man's hand whipped across the Abbot's face. "I will have an answer! Lieutenant, find me a quiet place to work."

"And the orphans, sir?"

"Orphans?" A negligent shrug. "Lock them in their rooms. The novices as well; we won't need them just yet."

It was midsummer at Mharao. Mharao was near Corelli's equator. The heat felt like a live thing behind the bolted shutters--the locked dormitories were stifling, and the trapped boys coughed and choked in the close foul air. Some of the littlests fainted, vomiting whatever was left of their lunches.

And in spite of the heat, they huddled together, shaking with fear. None of them could imagine what the Imperials were going to do.

And then they heard the first of the screams.

The screams, Auctor, the screams...

When they awakened in the middle of the night, dreaming, there were still cries and sobbing. When they were sent to the hall to eat--the Imperials did not starve them--it was almost impossible to chew the bread and stew for the muffled sounds that could be heard even through the thick iron doors.

Giors said that the blank-faced harsh-eyed men in dull grey were Imperial Intelligence. Giors whispered that after the grey men had come with more 'Troopers and herded the novices away.

And the screams, Auctor, the screams...

It wasn't the Abbot, though, who broke and told. The stark fury on the first grey man's face when he had what was left of the old man dragged out to be publicly shot told the boys that the Empire had broken neither the old man nor his faith.

One by one, up against the wall, the monks were murdered after being 'questioned.'

Han, Rey, and Giors kicked out one of the lower window shutters. They lifted the littlests out first, getting them onto the ground and shooing them off. Toshannah and some of the town street arabs had come with help. The 'invasion' was all over the town gossipnet, they said. They carried the toddlers if necessary, helping the older boys with the drop.

Some of them didn't make it to the safety of the woods. The troopers blasted them as casually as if they were shooting rabbits.

Some of them didn't make it on the streets. Honesty was a liability, morals a death sentence.

He was well-educated, with a gift for mechanics--Toshannah's gang liked him, could use him. 'Shannah taught him to fight, to steal, to screw--to use or sell whatever he could for just one more day of life. Better than ending up an example on the streets, or finding himself in some Imperial creche, as cannon fodder.

And every time he thought he couldn't last one more day, he remembered the last sight of the monastery, of the monks and novices. Remembered roiling clouds of smoke, the taste of bomb ash in the air,

the last terrible rising screams from the bombed abbey. He had to force himself to eat cooked meat for a month and a half afterward.

And Luke and Leia were depending on him. They had no right to ask him to do this.

"Goddamned mortal sin he's asking," Han muttered, glaring at a rust spot on the ship's underbelly. "As if I weren't damned already for all the laws I've broken."

But they needed him to help them. Amateurs, all of these rebels. Rebels--and monks who always had good reasons for their refusals. Good reasons and faith, and neither of them would keep you alive in the end.

Han threw the hydrospanner down, denting the delicate instrument. "Blast you, kid, I may just strangle you yet."

He went off across the bay to find his two pet rebels. They'd won, but they were going to do this--mortal sin--his way.

The Abbot nodded at him pleasantly and pointed to the chair opposite his desk. "Please sit down, my son. And tell me why you have come all this way to see us?"

Han nervously eased down into the hard-backed chair. He had half-expected to see a man like this, an old man with a wrinkled face, but was somehow still unnerved to find someone so visibly at peace, so full of faith in a world that had long ago turned its back on sorcerors and priests. He threw out his cover story. He hadn't been able to lie to the monks when he was a boy, and he couldn't lie now.

"I want to come back to the monastery, Father."

"Come back?"

"I was a postulant at the monastery outside Mharao. On Corelli. I was there when the--when the Imperials destroyed the monastery."

"It is treason to accuse the government of murdering innocent monks, my son--I am not afraid, but perhaps you should be more cautious."

Or risk this house of peace-- "Sorry, Father."

"How did you escape, if you were a postulant?"

"I ran away. I and some of the other orphans made it out."

"You must have been very young...?" The Abbot steepled his fingers and rested them against his lips.

"Fourteen, Father." Han looked down at his hands. Don't go in to the comps with dirty hands. How could he explain himself? "They were killing the monks, Father, they--just lined them up and started killing them. Not a word to us. Just on and on about the information they wanted, to the Abbot--to Father Fias. He was the monk in charge of

the computers. They killed him last, I think. I was fourteen. I think the youngest were five, six, something like that. They'd've killed all of us, sooner or later. If they knew I was from there, they might kill me now. I don't know. Maybe it all doesn't matter anymore. I mean, how did they explain Alderaan? When 'nuclear accident' didn't go over, the next I heard was 'rebel sabotage.'" He stood up, pacing the small office.

"Where did you go afterward?"

Han shrugged. "The streets. I had a couple of friends. Come three years later, you'd a' never known I'd been plannin' on bein' a monk. I was good, Father."

"Good?" The grave, questioning look on the Abbot's face was the same as the look Han remembered from Mharao.

"Good. I was the best damned mechanic they had, and it wasn't just because I could read, and they couldn't. I was good with my hands. I was good enough that Father Fias--" He stopped. Don't go in to-- "Don't go in to the comps with dirty hands. Father Fias was always putting me on penance for coming in late to prayer, and coming in after lights-out, and...." Swallowing air, staring down at his tightly clenched, gloved hands, Han went on, "He told me, if I was goin' to spend all of my free time working on greasy speeders, I would have to wear gloves. He wasn't going to have me--working on the comps with dirty hands." He looked up, and was surprised to find that it hurt like hell to smile. "I still wear gloves, Father."

"You cannot step back into the past, Han Solo." So gentle, the old man sounded. So serene. "What about your present life? Are you sure you do not mean merely to run away again?"

"I'm a freighter pilot. I've got my own ship, my own co. We talked it over. Call it a--a six-month's trial. If it won't work out, then I'll go back. But I want that chance to try, Father. Just that one chance." He was shaking with the words, trying his best to sound casual and knowing he was botching it completely. What if the old man sent him away?

"I see you have taken some thought in this. In the name of the Auctor, my son, I welcome you to the Brothers of Knowledge." The old man came stiffly and slowly to his feet and held out his hands in the traditional welcoming blessing.

Han knelt to lay his forehead in the Abbot's cupped hands. It seemed as if he were on the edge of a cliff, and across that yawning gulf there was a field of incredible peace. As if when he reached, he could touch the crumbling rim of that peace and he would find it real and solid, no crazy old Jedi's illusion.

"As a postulant, my son, you may choose a priest's name. Is there one that you would prefer?"

"Jhiach, Father." The Corellian saint--were there ever Corellian saints? he'd often doubted it--he'd chosen at fourteen.

"Saint Jhiach is a worthy choice. On your feet, Brother Jhiach--you can hardly go to your

rooms on your knees, you've done nothing to serve penance for at this point."

The Abbot was smiling.

And now it didn't seem as hard to smile in return.

Of course they put him in isolation.

They didn't call it that. It was referred to as meditation, or as a time to assess his wishes and affirm his vocation. It was a week's worth of isolation, twelve days and nights of lonely vigil in a meditation cell outside the monks' dormitory. His food was the monks' simple, usually stew accompanied by bread and weak d'eh or tart fruit juice, served by a brother in the habits of the silents, who might or might not smile at him, apparently depending on mood. It was also Han's own period of silence, while the monks checked his bona fides (or so he suspected).

It was also enough to drive a man out of his skull--unless you were used to meditation and silence.

Han Solo found he'd not forgotten the way of it.

About the tenth day, when he'd become quite used to a self-imposed schedule: rising, prayers while he stared out at the dawning sun through his slitted window, first meal, meditation, second meal, prayers, and bed; he found himself trying to explain to the watcher in his head about the quality of the silence.

It's what you hear through the silence that makes it worthwhile. Been a long while since I listened to birds in the morning, or the way rain sounds on water, or lizards' claws skittering on the pavement. No quieter here than sitting in the Falcon's cockpit after Chewie's gone off watch and listening to the tracking of the controls while watching the stars. Silence's like being naked--nothing between you and what's real.

The watcher replied scornfully, Now you sound like the kid, blathering about his damned Force and what it feels like.

Well, if this is what the Force feels like to him, no wonder he's so sold on it. Who knows, maybe his Force's no more than the Auctor Himself seen in a different way?

Oh, that's marvelous, that is. Picking it up on the never-never, are we? Han Solo, thief, spacer, pilot, monk.

Ah, the hell with it. Why shouldn't I be a monk if that's what I want?

Remember why you're here, Solo. Just remember why you're here.

On the twelfth day, just after matins, when he had 'turned his brain off' and was sitting running his beads through his fingers, letting himself relax

in preparation for meditation, the silent monk came in to get him.

He reminded himself again that to pull this off, he had to develop a protective personality, insert himself into his role, as it were. But he couldn't shuffle. He no longer knew how to move in the easy effortless glide the monk walking with him used. The best he could do was to shorten his stride so that he didn't outpace the brother.

In the hallway, they passed a female monk. There had been no women in the Mharao abbey. Han was startled. After he thought about it, he supposed that there was no reason not to have women in a monastery. Maybe it would be a temptation for some men...or women...

He tried to think of Leia Organa in monk's habiliments and hood, and had to suppress laughter by turning it into a cough. He couldn't imagine her with folded hands and composed face--Leia Organa tranquil? hah!--and reciting prayers and rituals. He could imagine her in other ways--and Han nearly smiled to himself before remembering that it'd be improper for a monk to leer. He blanked his mind and went on. Keep in character.

The Abbot was chatting to a small hooded figure sitting in front of him. Han blinked. The monk looked as if he were sitting, but there was no chair. Then, as the Abbot broke off to greet them, the little monk turned and stood. Something rose-and-green snaked out from beneath the habit a moment, and Han realized that he--she--it had been sitting on its reptilian tail.

"Ah, Brother Jhiach! and Brother Nokomi! for the moment, you are both relieved of your silence. Brother Nokomi, do you profess yourself satisfied of Brother Jhiach's intent?"

"Yes, Father." The silent monk had a eunuch's voice, high and sweet and girlish.

"Good. I, too, profess myself satisfied. Brother Jhiach, are you resolved in your novitiate?"

His heart was thudding, and the muscles of his throat painfully constricted, but Han managed to sound firm and serious. "I am, Father."

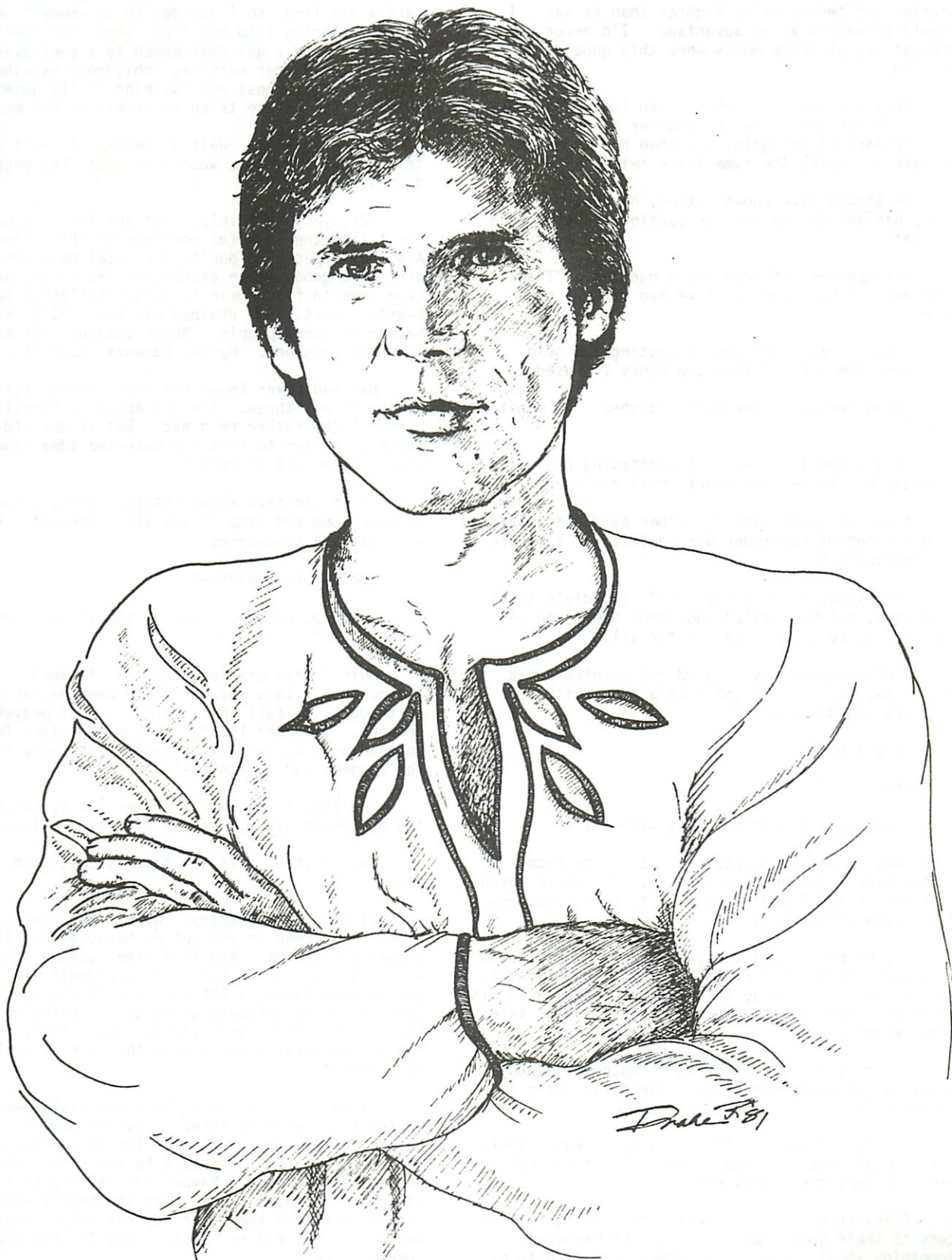
"Very well, then. Sister Ysstal is in need of an assistant, and since you have had training in computers, thanks to Father Fias (may the Auctor grant him peace), I have decided to place you in the computer rooms..."

Solo almost stopped breathing a moment. Automatic access to the computers? It was almost too easy! If he had still been a superstitious child, he might have believed either that he was being tested, or that the Auctor was favoring his task.

"...Sister will take you down now and show you around," finished the Abbot.

The little monk turned slowly, her pointed iguana's face questing up at him, and Han Solo had his second shock. Too easy.

Sister Ysstal was blind.



Damn, this guy is good! Han shook the sweat and hair out of his eyes, and circled his opponent warily, looking for some advantage.

It was the damndest thing, to be looking for an advantage against someone twenty centimeters shorter and twenty kilos lighter than he was. I should already have an advantage. I'd never have thought any of these monks were this good at hand-to-hand.

They circled each other. Han lunged and managed to catch and throw the smaller man. They circled each other again, and then Han made the mistake of trying the same trick twice.

He should have known better, he should. This time, Han was thrown and lay panting and winded on the mat.

His opponent offered him a hand up. "Thanks--that was the best workout I've had since I came here."

"Same here," said Han, accepting the help. "You sure don't fight like the monks I'm used to."

"Good reason." The other laughed. "I'm not a monk."

"Not a monk? But--" Straightening his clothes, Han looked the short, neat man over.

A second laugh, and the other held out a hand. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Giraud Victen. I'm here for Sanctuary."

"Oh, yeah, the Fightmaster!" Immediate suspicion rose, but Han smiled and shook hands--he was supposed to be a postulant, after all.

Victen rubbed his clipped and pointed beard. "You know, you don't fight like a monk, either. What are you doing here?"

"I'm a postulant."

"You?!"

"Yes, me. Something wrong with it?"

"What? Oh, no, certainly not." The Fightmaster made a deprecatory gesture. "I admire anyone with that kind of dedication. But, hell, man, you don't even walk like a monk!"

No, he probably didn't, by now. And he should have seen the man for Fleet, and a trained fighter, but he hadn't. Strange things were happening to his reflexes. Han shoved the worry away. He was safe here, after all.

Later, sitting with a cup of much-too-weak rhyui in his hand, Han found himself listening to Victen talk.

"...fair fight, Brother Jhiach, it was. Dueling's legal here. I should know. I was raised here, learned the blades here."

Tienalit his home? Fleet didn't assign officers to their home planets, that much Han knew; something about 'exposure to other planet cultures being invaluable experience for an officer.' Han

snorted. What they really meant was, 'no more big fish in a little pond.' What was Victen doing here? Han raised an eyebrow in question.

"Transferred," Victen answered. "From Coldon to Inqallu. And I had to change ships here. I had half a day free, so I decided to go--home." He paused, staring into his cup. Then, not looking up, went on. "And I got challenged to a duel over a woman I ate dinner with--my 'childhood sweetheart.'" There was bitterness and loathing in his quiet voice. "The police tried to arrest me for murder."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. I don't get this. It was a duel, wasn't it? He challenged you, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. But the local authorities don't like the Imperial governor or 'his' Fleet. And they especially don't like local boys who go off, make good in the aforementioned Fleet, and then come home to find their long-lost childhood sweethearts. Shit." He drained his cup. "I'd seen it happen to other people. Never thought I might be on the receiving end. My own parents, damn it--"

Han had never known his own parents, killed before he was three. The old Abbot on Corelli had been all the father he'd had. But if the old Abbot had ever chosen to cast him out--the idea made him sick. "I'm sure it hurt."

"I should have known better. Did you ever try to come home and find it was all different? Not at all what you remembered?"

"Well, Lieutenant--"

"Giraud, please. Gir, if the whole thing chokes you."

"Gir." Han grinned, but then frowned. "I did --come home. In a way." It had been easier than he thought, to fall into the rituals of prayer and penance. "No more looking over my shoulder for someone with a contract on my head, no more fighting for cargoes and payments--"

"No liquor, no women, prayers at all hours of the goddamned night," Victen finished, grimacing.

Han laughed. "If you hate it that much, why stay?"

"I'm under Sanctuary. Almost two months. Fleet can't come in and get me because they'll be breaking covenant. And if I step outside, the local police get me, and a terrible 'accident' will probably happen to me on the way back to the port. There are some delicate negotiations going on, or so they give me to understand. Until then, I wait. And you're here, fleeing from the outside world to be a monk?"

"I had to find out if this was really what I wanted to do with my life." The lie came all too easily to his lips, and it no longer sounded so much a lie. He wanted that peace he had seen. He wanted someplace to belong. Maybe that was why he had stayed on Yavin, had gone with the rebels when he should have gone the other way entirely. Maybe that was why in the end he had said yes to this crazy idea of Luke's.

"And is it?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

"Hell of a way to decide about the rest of your life."

"It's a better way than I've been using," Han answered, and that at least was totally honest.

He had trouble sleeping that evening, tossing and turning on the hard pallet. In the dark, he fumbled for the 'worry beads' that every monk, novice, postulant, and acolyte carried in their robes. Rubbing the smooth stone beads between his calloused fingers, he fell asleep reciting the litanies of his childhood.

"From the sins of the flesh, Auctor deliver us. From our enemies and those who would trouble us, Auctor deliver us. From our doubts and our fears, Auctor deliver us..."

The next morning, Han was seated at the computer console programming in a list of new information when Sister decided she needed some lunch. Or breakfast, rather, since it was before matins. Sister, being both blind and reptilian, ran on some kind of internal clock that made no sense at all to him. Her breakfast, however, was going to put quite a crimp in things, since he'd have to leave and find something to do while she was gone.

But as he started to rise, she said, "Don't bother, Brother Jhiach. You're capable of putting in the data without my supervision. Go ahead--I'll try to be back before prayers. If I'm not, just lock up and go."

Han sat staring at the keyboard as the door closed behind her. It meant, of course, that the monks now trusted him completely. The comps were laid open and naked before him like a trusting virgin. A few flicks of the keys--

The required files were there, easy when you knew the codes as he did. Now all it needed--

His fingers remained poised and impotent over the panels as he tried to decide. A few minutes' work...no better opportunity than this...the rebels against the monks...Leia... He broke out in a cold sweat as he watched his hands descend of their own volition and input the codes, and then saw the blinking controls recording the files on microtape. A few minutes' work, and the tapes dropped into his nerveless hand.

Han put the tapes away inside his robes, unable to think about the rape he had just committed, and returned to the data, programming as quickly as his fingers could plug in the information.

He had done what he had come for. There would be no records, no way for anyone to know what he had done...

He was late to morning prayer.

Being late to matins, of course, meant that he

was late to lunch. He came in to meal in too much of a rush and was scowled at by an older monk.

Giraud Victen smiled at him, from a corner table. Han took it as an invitation and brought his piersted over to the table.

"Sit down, 'Brother.'" Victen's ingenuous smile took the sting out of the word. "You're late."

"Was late to prayers." Han muttered a hasty blessing and started on his food.

"What--they make you do penance?"

"No, of course not. I could just have gone in from where they were in the ritual, but I prefer to start from the beginning and finish out-of-pace. It's all silent, anyway--it doesn't really matter what time you come in, as long as you don't distract anyone else." He got up to refill his cup and said, as he sat back down, "But you've seen people come in late to services, haven't you?"

"I've never been to services."

"What? Never? Why not?"

Giraud shot him a half-surprised look and said, "Never had any reason, I suppose. Why should I go?"

It's none of my business whether or not he chooses to go to services. Jhiach, Solo, you'd damn all think you were responsible for the man's immortal soul or something. Well--if I were a monk, I... He heard himself say, "Why shouldn't you? You were complaining about how bored you were. It'd give you something to do, after all."

"Yeah, but--"

"Yeah, but, what?"

"Well, I--" Silence. "I didn't think I'd be allowed." There was a fine harsh edge of embarrassment to the Imperial's voice.

For a second, Han enjoyed that embarrassment in a very unpriestly way, and then he scolded himself, putting the amusement aside. "This is a monastery, Gir. Of course you'd be allowed. The one thing everybody is allowed to do is pray. Here, tell you what, why don't you come to vespers with me?"

Giraud Victen looked steadily into his eyes. There was something at the back of the Fightmaster's pale-grass-green eyes that Han could not classify, that made him just a little uneasy. Then that look was gone, and Victen was only a man, not much older than Han himself, who smiled and shrugged and said, "All right."

There was a subdued hum of monotone chanting--one of the small points that set vespers apart from some of the other services--accompanied by the shrill sweet tones of Sister Qeturah's flute-playing and the hollow beats of Brother Nokomi's prayer drum. At the chapel's front, the Abbot was swinging the censer in rhythm with the chant, his brow furrowed and his dark eyes closed and lips moving in some silent prayer of his own.

Han was immediately swept into the web of the ritual, slipping into the gestalt encouraged by the chant and the flower-and-resin odor of the incense, at one with the peace he could touch only here and in the computer rooms. He was aware, with something he could uncomfortably not quite call 'sight,' that Giraud had stopped dead, and was looking about himself with a bemused expression that seemed incongruous on his sharp, cynical, bearded face.

"Brother," he whispered, "what's that smell?"

"Incense."

"I've never--" Gir stopped, then said with the air of someone who was trying to find words, "it's very nice." He shook his head sharply. "I mean, shit--uh--never mind. What do we do now?"

"We kneel." Han managed not to laugh at the helpless look on Giraud's face. "Back here so we don't distract anyone," he said, having pity on the other man. "And you try to compose yourself to meditation."

"All right." Vichten sighed.

Han had a difficult time reaching the true gestalt state that day. The Fightmaster was a distraction, sitting like a rigid plaster saint beside him, struggling so hard not to be a distraction that he couldn't help but disrupt. Finally ignoring him, Han began to concentrate on his meditation. He was hardly aware that Vichten had slipped into the trance when he did, though he was aware that the presence of one more eager soul was a transcendent pleasure.

Meditation was relaxation and euphoria, each supporting and intensifying the other. The peace was like a line of light slipping subtly around the barriers of his cynical mind to draw him upward into the cool and mathematically precise beauty of the universe. He came down reluctantly, dazed, stretching involuntarily like a great sleepy satiated animal.

Someone had draped a strand of prayer beads over Vichten's hard hands. When Han glanced over at him, Vichten held his hands up with such an unintentionally comic look of helpless distress that Han could not but laugh.

"What," Vichten demanded, "do I do with these?"

"They're worry beads--" Han went off in gales of laughter at the startled look on the Imperial's face.

"You're damned cheerful," Gir said sourly.

"Can't help it after meditation. Can you?"

Vichten's face contorted oddly, and he looked everywhere but at Han. Then he sighed, and said, "Well, I...no..." sighed again, and added, "Tell me about these beads, Brother."

Someone was shaking him, calling his name. Han wondered, momentarily, how he could have let anyone but Chewie get that close to him while he slept. Then he pushed the sleepiness and the dreams aside

and tried to pay attention to what...Giraud...was saying.

"I need to talk to you, Brother. Will you listen?"

It was too late, too early, for talking. Han mumbled, "Morning?" without overmuch conviction.

"Please, Brother, I've got to talk with you now." Vichten sat down on the low stool near the bed. He rubbed his hands together nervously. "It is important--please?"

"All right. All right." Han ran a hand through his hair and sat up, pulling the covers up around his waist to shield his nakedness from Tienalit's chilly night. "I'm listening."

"You started me thinking, Brother. About coming back here. About-- I tried to talk to the Abbot, but he's a busy man--" More softly, Vichten said, "An old man. The other monks--they're convent-raised, the lot of 'em--I guess not many outsiders come to a monastery. They've never lived--" he waved one small hand vaguely, "out there. Brother, maybe I've been wrong. I'm not a religious man, but maybe there is something else. I'm a tech officer, I punch buttons for a living. I don't know anything about animal husbandry, or tending a garden, or, or any of the things they do here to keep the monastery running. What could I do in a place like this?"

He stood up to pace the room--a small man in Fleet-issue in a small monk's sleeping cell looking not so much incongruous as simply an anachronism. "How can I be useful, Brother? I don't know what you or any other monk does. I can't--I don't know these people to ask them. And I'm here under Sanctuary. I'm not supposed to go anywhere but the gym, the library, and the dining area. I don't even know what goddamned books to look up. Can't go to any other monasteries, so--" He turned back to Han, putting his hands out with an air of frustration and bewilderment. "Help me, Brother."

Han stared at the Imperial a moment, totally unprepared to be approached and consulted as a monk. Getting up, he mechanically dressed in the heavy green robes that were now somehow--not comfortable. He retrieved his beads from the bed and stuffed them into the deep side pocket of his overtunic. "Let's go for a walk, Gir."

"All right--where?"

"Anywhere," Han replied brusquely. "I have to think."

The corridors were quiet, save for an occasional murmur of someone praying. As he walked and tried to cobble an answer, he fingered his worry beads, and the cool smooth ellipses felt right in his palm.

"I haven't been in a monastery for almost fifteen years, Gir." He was silent for a few minutes, thinking, remembering Father Fias' kindly ancient face. "I used to think I was certain of my--vocation. That was when I was a boy. did I ever tell you that the Empire destroyed the monastery I was raised in?"

"No. No, you never did."

There was a queer note to the Fightmaster's voice, and Han glanced at him curiously, but Giraud's face was bland and he seemed only to be listening. Han went on. "I was--fourteen, I think, when I went on the street. 'Shannah taught me a lot. She taught me almost everything I know. But there were times I thought about the monastery. Like all the peace and security I would ever have was tied up in the monastery, and it had all been destroyed--"

The only sound in the maze of corridors was still their booted feet, and Han's were padded soles. He realized that he was walking like a monk, not quite shuffling, but moving smoothly and silently. "I don't know if I believed in God. The Auctor was something the monks talked about. But where I was closest to believing--"

He paused, trying to think of how to phrase his thoughts, and stopped in confusion, looking around himself. Where were they? Oh. Well, yes, it did make sense. He was troubled, and here again he had come to the only place where everything was logical, orderly, properly laid out. He punched in an admit code and led Giraud into the computer room.

"If there was an Auctor..." He touched a light-plate and the dim glow of the nightlights brightened slightly. The particular monk who ran this section was blind, after all, had lights only as a courtesy to her sighted fellows. "If there was indeed something more powerful than men, then surely He--or She, or It--would have protected those monks who believed in Him with such--such passion, such overwhelming certainty. After that, I couldn't believe in any of that, except--here. Or on my ship." He petted a computer bank with absent affection. "The monks talked about an orderly universe. A pair of unseen hands that set things to proceed in an orderly fashion. And it's here, it's all here, in every piece of machinery I've ever touched, ever worked on, that sense of logic and order that's supposed to be in this God we all talk about. I've never been closer to the Auctor than in these computers. There has to be reason behind everything that happens--what's the point of all this crap if He's some blind juggler who just plays havoc with our lives because it amuses him? That's the answer, Gir--if there's a place for me here, there's one for you. The monks don't have make-work. They'd find you useful somehow. It's the only answer I have--"

"And it makes sense. I'm sorry for that. It's tempting, Brother, very tempting, and I am sorry. Believe me, I'm sorry."

The tone of Giraud's voice jerked Han around, and he stared amazed at the knife that suddenly appeared in the man's hand.

"I hadn't thought you could so nearly convince me." Vichten began to circle, crouching with a flowing protective motion that was so skilled it seemed instinctive. "If I weren't already sworn... But I'm Imperial. I have duties...and your monks have some information I require. I'd hoped to eventually coax you into taking me here. It's quicker this way, and neither of us will be so badly hurt. I won't kill you unless you make it necessary, Brother. Just step aside and stand still. I'm a

computer officer myself. It'll only take me a few minutes."

Han, stunned, edged aside. Giraud went to the computers and began to play with the access, his slender white fingers moving with the easy touch of a practiced--rapist.

Of course. How stupid he had been. Han cursed himself voicelessly. How blindly idiotic. Vichten had been sent for the same information Han had taken. And afterward, the Empire would annihilate this abbey with the same fine, careless hand that had eradicated Han's own innocent childhood--

Han jumped the Fightmaster.

Lights flashed from the banks, and Vichten shoved him back with some complicated twist, kicked him in the chest to get him further away.

Han came back. Struggling to stay calm, he circled the smaller man, knowing that Vichten had taken him out in practice, and that he had no real defense in hand-to-hand against a man trained to battle for a living. If he lost his temper, he might as well give the whole thing up now...

The knife laid a gash across his ribs. Han yelped and connected briefly with the Imperial's gut. The knife went across the room.

Han himself went across the room, cracking his head against a switch. Sirens were beeping now, lights flashing on and off with dizzy regularity. From somewhere came the sound of feet running. the lights were dimming--

"I'm sorry, Brother. I am sorry--"

To try and protect these monks, he'd reacted with violence; violence was second nature to him. Here he was among pacifists, and he had wanted to fight, to kill, had even relished the thought of beating Vichten--

There were gentle hands on him, but he was too far under consciousness to truly be aware.

Han went out.

"Brother Jhiach. Brother. Can you hear me?"

It was not the Imperial's voice. It was--the Abbot. Yes. The Abbot of the Don monastery. Han blinked, and groaned, and put his hand to his aching head.

"Yes, Father--"

"Good. You're awake. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three?"

"Good, good. There's no permanent damage, I think. Brother, what were you doing in the computer rooms?"

Han bluntly and with regrettable vulgarity told the tale of his foolishness. The Abbot did not censure him, only sighed and shook his head.

"Our young master Vichten has been given over to the local authorities for violating Sanctuary. He did seem concerned that you had not been fatally injured. And I suspect now that the local authorities were in collusion with Fleet. Vichten did not get the information from our computers, thanks to you. We have put that panel under further protection--an automatic wipe. Brother, you have made restitution for your momentary lapse, and I think that in the future--"

Han shook his head in negation. "There's no future, Father. I can't stay."

"My son?"

"Father, when I saw him--when he told me--I wanted to kill him."

"We've all done that." The Abbot tucked his hands in his sleeves and regarded Han gravely.

There was a pleasant odor of incense to the abbey infirmary. Han could not meet the old monk's eyes. "I'm a violent man, Father. If I can't even keep the peace in here-- I thought I had it. I thought I finally believed. I guess--I was wrong."

"I see. You have made your decision."

"I have to leave." Han plucked at the woven blanket, feeling the tears sting his eyes, burn at his throat.

"I cannot keep you against your will; I will not try. There will always be a place for you in the Auctor's house, my son. And I would like you to think about one thing on your travels."

"Yes, Father."

The old man's face was serene with some kind of

inner light. He looked more like that old fossil Kenobi than Han would have thought possible. "Think about this, my son--if there is no God, then why was it that Vichten approached you? Why, in fact, were you sent here at this time? You kept that information from falling into the wrong hands. And you warned us to hide the tapes more carefully. Think on that."

On the tapes that he would take back for the Alliance. Han managed a smile, and said, "Yes, Father."

"Sleep for a while, now, my son."

Three days later, the monastery's outer gates shut behind Han. He adjusted the weight of the blaster around his hips, and tugged his jacket down. It was a cool day, and he turned his face up to the sun's warmth a minute before he slung his backpack over his broad shoulders.

A mile to town. He'd be with Chewie in a half-hour. He and his tapes would be with Luke--and Leia--in a day or two after that. Savior of the Alliance, bringing weapons tapes like offerings.

"Shit," he said out loud.

The pack was scraping unpleasantly on something in his back pocket, and he pulled out the string of beads the Abbot had insisted he take. They were still cool and smooth and irrevocably right to his touch.

He put them in a front pocket. Before he stepped onto the stone road that led to town, he shook the dust from the monastery steps off his freshly polished boots and started the long walk back to town and his friends. ✱

Invocation

Into the arms of The Force
I place my life.
Into Its molten Beauty
Do I place my heart.
From The Force I draw
my sustenance
my understanding
and my hope.
Into the arms of The Force
Do I place my life.

Angela-marie Varesano

The Seeker

I woke up just the other day to a stranger in my mirror
How long has it been since I've been gone?
I thought of you as not before
I prayed--yes, me--to find you
I wondered why it took me so damn long.

And so I asked that man who stood before me
If life or love or hope might bring me you
'Cause, love, my life is empty like a bird without a song
Like a clear and starless night without you.

Do you think she'll be there?
You haven't talked of her in years.
Do you think she'll be there?
Why should she wait for a fool like you?
Do you think she'll be there?
Listen, that's the least that you should fear.
Do you think she'll be there?
Do you think she'll be there?



As I recall, we parted with some tears and pain between us;
And a feeling that the end of time had come;
But I'm the one who walked away
As you stood waiting for me;
I never thought that I could be so dumb. (Chorus)

I've looked around the world, and every woman has some beauty
Enough to fill some loner's empty space;
But somehow, what I'm seein'
It always fades away
And my blind heart can only see your face. (Chorus)

And so tonight, I'm headin' out to find you
Although I'll speak and seek for other things;
'Cause, love, you are the best important hope in my fool life;
I'm flyin' home to you on time-clipped wings.



Hey, will you be there?
I haven't begged for many years.
Hey, will you be there?
Now, why should you ever wait for me?
Love, I hope you'll be there:
They say that you're the most to fear.
Hey, will you be there?
Hey, will you be there?
Oh, I hope you'll be there--
You've got to be there.



THE RETURN

ANGELA-MARIE VARESANO

"You've failed, Your Highness. I am a Jedi... as my Father before me!"

The blazing nexus of the Force that was Luke Skywalker stood between Darth Vader and his Emperor, defying his Master with a ringing evocation of truth.

Darth had not expected to hear those words. He had not expected to hear or perceive anything again. Just a moment before, Skywalker had stood over him, a battle-fury ignited by anger, hate consuming his spirit. Skywalker, holder of promise and hope, Dark Jedi, the long-sought-for link with the past and the future--his son--had held the livid green lightsabre blade to his throat in terrible victory. Weakened by his ferocious attacks, maimed and disarmed--as his son had once been--Vader could do no more than watch in awe as Skywalker readied for the final overpowering, taking his life and his place at the Emperor's side. The power flaming through the young warrior was such that Vader doubted the Emperor would survive him long.

But then, as Vader waited for the end, the tides turned within his son. Some spark flowed between them, something akin to recognition, to identification, something that felt like a power he had not known for a long, long time. And the Darkness was thrown back, and Skywalker stood between him and the Emperor like an impossible beacon of light.

Darth could sense the Emperor's passionate desire to absorb this entity into himself, could feel the deep thrumming in the air when his Master's prize shattered those plans. Now the Emperor would unleash the Dark force which even Vader feared, and had never mastered. Had he not warned Luke of the power of the Dark Side? Now that beacon would be extinguished, for what could stand against his Master?

"So be it, Jedi," the Emperor intoned.

Vader saw the Dark power building, drawn from a travesty of the Force, as his Master prepared to throw his will against the young Skywalker. He dreaded to see what would follow. Part of him cried in anguish, knowing what it had been like to be tested against the Emperor. Yet the part of him that was Darth Vader stood back, unwilling to pull from the being for whom he had betrayed another brotherhood, the being whom he had

followed for so many years, the being who had promised him victory and might and immortal service and who had brought him, in the end, only bitterness. How could there be another choice now? Was he not committed to his Master, sealed forever in blood and hatred?

"If you will not be turned, then you will be destroyed."

As Vader lay on his side, spent, the indigo aura formed around Palpatine. With a loud crack, the lightnings tore forth from his Master's hands and struck down Skywalker. Luke cried out as the searing blast threw him against the control console. For a single moment, he was about to plunge down the open reactor shaft. Vader struggled to a sitting position and saw that, by some effort of will and implacable control, Luke managed to grab hold of the equipment and haul himself away from the chasm. Vader knew astonishment as the first of the lightnings died down. Could this Skywalker, by some strange talent, learn to deflect such attack with the Force?

"Young fool!" the Emperor gloated.

Vader had heard that taunt before. More than twenty-five years ago, it had been Anakin who had heard those words, and who had swayed to that power.

Luke, remnants of the deadly lightning flowing down him and into the machinery, pulled himself slowly, with great effort, to the top of the console.

"Only now--at the end--do you understand!"

The Emperor's fire blasted Luke again, hitting him full in the chest. The young warrior went down, screaming, under the relentless bolts.

What would he give to take away that understanding of pain from his son? What had the Emperor ever brought him but the overpowering feeling of helplessness against the inevitable, insatiable Dark power? This power was such that when he, Vader, had given in to it, all ways back were obliterated to his sight. He had immolated his world in offering to that power, had gone against a blood-tie and sought to destroy his son, and, when he failed to sway Luke with that power, had delivered his son to his Emperor.

Vader gathered his strength and forced himself upright. His right arm sent waves of pain through him as the cyber unit continued to only partly function. Vader fought back that sensation and let something else build within him. There was a greater need that called to him. For Luke had not been able to block the last of the Emperor's savage attacks, and the blue lightning was starting to burn him.

"Your feeble skills are no match for the Dark side," intoned Palpatine.

The being Vader called Master moved closer to his victim, as if to savor his triumph better.

Luke lay on the floor before the console, gasping for breath. Vader could feel his son fight to concentrate on something--something of all things the most important...a name...Anakin.

Vader knew the Emperor had heard it, too, for the ultraviolet bolts ripped from his hands again and tore through Skywalker. Luke, no more strength left to shield against the attack, absorbed its full impact. He writhed in agony. The bolts were so concentrated that they tore through him and leapt to the nearby computers and monitors. Vader could see the console flare up in warning signals and malfunction lights as several units burst under the impact and the electric-like force overloaded the circuits.

Now the Emperor stood over his son, gazing at him with something that seemed like regret for lost opportunity...or was it regret for the challenge between Master and apprentice that would never be, regret for the lost savor of endless conflicts that would never turn to fear in his dark spirit.

Luke was turned face down, his body contorted. As Vader watched, the warrior moved slowly, trying to lift himself. His hair and uniform had been singed and were still smoking. To Vader's astonishment, Luke pulled back a part of his consciousness from the pain and concentrated again.

("Father!! I won't...let go...of what I feel is true! I won't betray you that way!")

"You have paid the price for your lack of vision," the Emperor declared. A twisted smile played at the corner of his mouth.

Vader felt the Force within him wrench his center as he sensed what would follow. Horrified, he watched as the Emperor closed in and directed the blue lightning to ground in his son. The intensity increased, and Luke was thrown about by the impact. His screams tore at Vader.

"Father, please!"

Luke seemed to reach out a hand toward him through the devastating fire.

"Help...me...!"

Suddenly, the Emperor ceased his onslaught and observed the effects of his handiwork, prolonging his final negation of the young Jedi's spirit.

Luke was shaking from the ordeal, not moving from the place where he had fallen, his eyes half open. Vader felt his son's thought still, despite

all, grasping one vision with every power left to him.

("Anakin!")

"Now, young Skywalker, you will die!"

The Emperor's face twisted into a killing fury as he let loose jagged rivers of searing lightning that fastened on Luke like ravaging conduits of the Dark Side, sucking up all life and hope.

At last, summoned by that name, Anakin/Vader acted.

He did not know whether it was hatred and his own possessive indignation that drove him and gave him the strength to defy his Master, or his son's faith, but Vader moved quickly, grabbing the Emperor, and, heedless of the lightning that was flowing through him now, hurled his burden down the open reactor shaft.

The universe seemed to burst apart for him as the Emperor died, consumed by the fires within and without. Vader fell in a heap to the floor, his life support system damaged, his strength almost gone. He held himself there, clutching a guard-rail, for long seconds.

Then he turned his face and his heart to his son.

Luke lay still near the instrument console. For a hideous moment, Vader searched frantically in the Force for a sign of life and found none. Then, there came a response, a small flicker, barely perceptible, pulsing with the glory of a name.

Vader crawled to his son's side, and touched him, for the first time, in tenderness. Grasping his shoulder, he turned him over to the light.

The young Skywalker stirred and opened his eyes slowly. Tears streamed down Luke's face. His gaze fell on Anakin/Vader and he acknowledged the bond.

"Luke...Son...am I in time?"

"Yes...Father...In time to stop me from being lost."

The reply was barely a whisper.

Vader struggled against the debilitating effects of his injuries to gather the Force into a healing flow for his son. So many years had passed since he had done that...so many years.

Luke watched him, his breath coming more raggedly now. With a will that drew on the Force, he moved his hand to rest on his father's arm. His brow furrowed in pain.

"Father...I'm sorry...for hurting you. I tried...another way... Didn't work. Nothing seemed to bring you back."

He swallowed and fought to continue.

"The other Skywalker...my sister...Leia...is my sister. Go to her, Father. Teach her to be a Jedi...as was her father before her."



Luke was grasping his arm now, a desperate intensity driving his concentration.

"Tell her...my love...lives in you."

As Anakin/Vader watched, his son's eyes filled with some unspeakable vision; a radiance greater than all the stars could be seen in them. Even Anakin/Vader could see it. Luke's body shuddered in his arms. With a deep calm that transcended the ravaged human form, Luke Skywalker gave his last breath into the Force.

Anakin/Vader cried out, calling his son's name, raging against the decisions that had brought things to this point. In waiting too long to defy the Emperor, Vader had allowed Palpatine's power to be poured out in lethal thoroughness. The bolts, grounded in Luke, had depleted the Emperor and made possible Vader's attack and survival. And the cost was his son's life.

How long Vader knelt there he did not know. He gradually became aware of external howlings and explosions that matched the storms in his soul. The **Death Star** was under attack. As Luke had hoped, as the Emperor had foretold would not happen, against all odds--the **Death Star** was being destroyed under him. For a moment, Anakin/Vader thought to kneel there, eternally, waiting for the final explosions that would purge him from life and the sorrow that shook him.

"Would you truly be purged, Vader?" he asked himself. "Would you truly be cleansed from the grip of the Emperor, from the evil that you worshipped for so long, from the wrecked hopes, the forgotten, long-buried dreams, the suffering that you caused and endured, the betrayal of Masters, the destruction of a way of life...the death of your son?"

Vader saw the answer within his heart, and it frightened him.

He dragged himself to his feet and stood upright. Staggering, he searched the chamber and finally found what he sought. Holding onto the burning need that drove him, he reached the place where Luke's lightsabre had come to rest when the

Jedi had cast it aside to fight with another weapon. Slowly, as if it burned him, he picked up the weapon and returned.

Kneeling beside the Jedi warrior, he clipped the sabre to his belt. The strength he now called upon was new, yet old; it came from the Force he had not used in years. It seeped and finally flowed into him, as he renewed an oath long taken and too long forsworn. On his son's lightsabre, Anakin swore to return to the Force of Life no matter what lay before him.

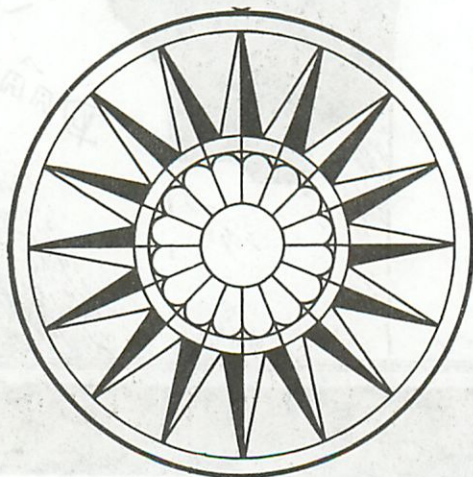
Working carefully, he lifted his beloved burden into his arms. He would endure the purging. He was a Jedi, as his son was, as his daughter would be... if she could accept the training from him. He could rebuild the Order. Cleansed by the task, he could pass on the Jedi fire to those who would follow. He had to try. Without that offering, there was no use to life. And his son had commanded it, as his son had called him to life again.

There would be no joy in that path before him. There would be sorrow and pain, rejection and fear. The path would demand of him a living sacrifice. He hoisted his burden more firmly to him. In the end, perhaps, there would be a chance he would be allowed to join his son in the Force. But there would be a healing, and he would finally know the kind of peace only faithfulness to one's duty in the Force could bring. He was holding an example of such faithfulness.

Struggling against collapse, he came to the shuttlecraft, still waiting on the same pad where he and his son had left it not so long ago. Tremors rocked the **Death Star** as the Emperor's deadly satellite began to disintegrate around him.

He would follow the path of return. And if such service were a strange thing, alien, as yet awkward to his spirit, he would make himself learn from the memories of what had taken place this day.

Anakin Skywalker, Lord of the Sith, Jedi Knight, carried his son's body into the shuttlecraft and left the **Death Star** for the green forests of Endor. *



Search Party

Roberta Rogow

"Beep--Beep--Beep! Bip-bip-bip! Beep-Beep-Beep! Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Au secours! Au secours! Helfen-mir! Helfen-mir!" The female voice ran through a dozen linguistic variations of the same message: HELP!

The four people (three if you discount ambuquads) in Dr. Huer's office stared at each other. Dr. Huer frowned at the tape-player. Capt. Buck Rogers shook his head. Col. Wilma Deering tapped an impatient finger on Dr. Huer's desk-top. Only the little ambuquad, Twiki, and his companion-piece Dr. Theophilus, appeared to be unmoved by the panic-stricken message.

"Where did this come from?" Wilma asked.

"It was recorded by one of our shuttle-vessels, ferrying cargo from the moonbase loading docks to New Chicago," Dr. Huer said. "The pilot heard the message while he was passing over the Old Newyork District."

"Then it's New Newyork's problem," Wilma said decisively.

Dr. Huer looked harassed. "New Newyork is in its usual disorganized state," he said. "Even their computer council can't seem to agree on any one plan of dealing with this message. They've found the location of the message, within a square mile. Twiki, if you please?"

The ambuquad waddled over to the section of wall that served as a viewing-screen. Automatically, the lights dimmed. Buck Rogers gasped involuntarily at the sight of the tops of familiar buildings projecting out of what appeared to be a cast sea. He could recognize the gothic arches of the Chrysler Building, the flat-topped roofs of the World Trade Center, and the needle-like antenna that capped the Empire State Building.

"What happened to New York?" Buck asked, shocked.

"We believe it was one of the results of the Great Holocaust," Dr. Huer said. "During the Final Confrontation, nuclear bombs were set off near the polar ice-caps. The resulting melting of the polar ice raised the levels of the world's oceans. Many coastal areas were destroyed totally. Newyork District survived, in part. However, the government and most of the population was evacuated to already-existing structures about a hundred miles north. At one time the area was known as a playground."

"Be-be-be--the Borscht Belt!" Twiki added.

Buck's fascinated gaze never wavered from the screen. "And you think someone survived, someone who's still there?"

Dr. Huer's voice took on a pedantic tone. "We know that there were survivors. According to the New Newyork Cultural Directorate, there are at least two tribes of Mutants living in the area beyond the Forcefields. They trade with some of the New Newyorkers, but naturally, most of the city people will have nothing to do with them."

Wilma's voice was tense as she spoke: "This is not New Chicago's problem. The message is in New Newyork's jurisdiction--let them send the search party."

Buck glanced sharply at his commanding officer. He had seen Wilma angry, he had even seen her upset, but he had never known her to refuse a mission before.

"There's someone still living there," Buck pointed out.

"Mutants!" Wilma spat out.

Dr. Theo's rational voice cut through her anger. "Any information we can find dealing with the Great Holocaust will help us to understand how to prevent a similar occurrence in our own time."

"How did it start, anyway?" Buck asked.

Dr. Huer sighed. "No one knows. That's what we were hoping we could find out from you, Buck. Perhaps, buried in your memory, is some clue--"

Buck grinned. "I was a rocket jockey, Doc. I left politics to the politicians, and just flew the planes."

"That was most narrow-minded of you," chided Dr. Theophilus.

Buck shrugged. "There wasn't much a guy like me could do, anyway. The day I left, on that last mission, the newspapers and satellite broadcasts were full of some weirdo who had managed to persuade all the big shots at the U. N. to sit down and talk about a final major peace treaty. He'd gotten them off somewhere alone--"

"And?" Dr. Huer and Dr. Theo asked simultaneously.

Buck shook his head. "I switched to the baseball scores," he said.

Wilma snorted derisively. "Well, Captain Rogers, I hope you're more alert on this mission." The Colonel turned to Dr. Huer, an expression of distaste on her face. "I suppose we have to deal with Zelda?"

Dr. Huer nodded. "I've already contacted the New Newyork Cultural Directorate. Zelda Deering will be waiting for you at her establishment. She'll guide you, for a fee."

Buck's eyebrow's went up at the name 'Deering.' Wilma's face was set in severe lines.

Buck shrugged and said, "I visited New York once, back when I was a flyer. It was a hairy place, back then--"

Wilma snapped out, "We won't be sightseeing, Buck, we have a job to do. I'll meet you at the shuttletube in one hour. Dr. Huer, will you be coming this time?"

"No, I think Dr. Theophilus will do better than I. Twiki, of course, will serve as carrier." The older man looked thoughtful. "Buck, we may need your experience in twentieth-century mores and idioms to deal with whoever is sending those messages. They're couched in late 20th/Early 21st Century English, as well as other languages and dialects of that period."

"Who else knows about this?" Wilma asked.

"No one, at present," Dr. Huer said. "This is a find of the first importance. We must verify its authenticity before we announce that another survivor has been discovered. New Newyorkers are known to be--eccentric."

"You mean, this might be a joke?" Buck said.

"We don't know what it is," Wilma said briskly. "That's what we're going to find out!"

"Yes, Colonel!" Buck snapped off a salute.

Ignoring him, Dr. Huer turned to Wilma. "This won't be easy for you, Colonel," he said. But

there's no one else I can trust. If there really is a survivor--we must save her."

Wilma smiled ruefully. "And of course, if there actually is a female survivor, Captain Rogers will be quite pleased."

Buck grinned broadly and snapped Wilma another salute. Humming "I Love New York" under his breath, he headed for his quarters.

Wilma was curiously silent as the shuttletube whooshed the party from New Chicago to New Newyork in less than an hour. Buck wondered at the gathering tension that creased her forehead and tightened her back until she looked as if she were getting ready for a full-dress inspection.

The New Chicago passengers debarked in a vaulted, echoing chamber. A tall, cadaverous-looking man in a black jumpsuit with ZD embroidered on the sleeve approached them.

"Colonel Deering?" he asked tentatively. Wilma nodded. "I am Ichabod. My orders are to take you to the ZeeDee Main Offices. Will you come with me, please?"

Buck, Wilma, and Twiki/Theo followed Ichabod to an electric go-cart, open to catch the fitful breezes. Buck was conscious of being extremely warm. Wondering what had happened to climate-controlled weather, he opened the collar of his jump-suit.

Dr. Theo noticed his discomfort. "It's the New Newyork weather," he assured the ex-pilot. "The computer council of New Newyork provides a heatwave twice every summer, and a blizzard once every winter. They claim it keeps the population alert."

Wilma's upper lip was beaded with sweat, but she made no move to adjust her clothing to the temperature. Buck watched the multi-colored throng that surged up and down the walkways of New Newyork. They seemed to have dressed themselves in whatever garments took their fancy. Buck approved of the flimsy floral-printed skirts on the women, but he wasn't too sure whether he liked some of the bellies that bulged over well-worn jeans on the hairy-chested men who wandered by. Street-vendors hawked everything from handcrafts to hot dogs.

"Yep," Buck said to himself, "some things never change. New York is still New York, even if they've moved it to the Catskills."

The go-cart stopped in front of an imposing edifice. Two plate-glass windows bore the legend ZeeDee Trading Co. Inside the windows was the most astonishing collection of oddments Buck had ever seen. Rusting kitchenware, battered toys, electrical components, old garments, household appliances, tattered books, elegantly decorated bibelots--all thrown together in one huge hugger-mugger, as if the contents of three or four flea-markets had been tossed onto one heap.

Inside the dark store there was more of the same, with a musty smell added. Ichabod led them through aisles crowded with broken furniture, pieces of old machinery, and cracked statuary. Buck shook



his head at the oddments.

"So--this is your living fossil?" From the back of the shop, a woman greeted them. She was much shorter than Wilma, and a good deal stockier, with short black hair cut in a serviceable bob, a snub nose, quizzical dark eyes, and a sarcastic rasp in her voice that was echoed by Wilma's crisp, official tones. She was dressed in an elegant black caftan, shot with iridescent threads.

"Captain Rogers, this is Zelda Deering. She will be our guide for this mission."

Buck smiled and extended his hand. Zelda took it for a brief moment, then turned back to Wilma.

"I hope you're ready to meet my terms," Zelda said. "I'm not officially connected with the Cultural Consulate any more. I get paid for my services."

"I thought that had been straightened out," Wilma began.

"Trust a Defense Directorate robot to say that! Nothing is settled, Colonel, until your Dr. Theo puts his imprint on the contract." Zelda tapped twice on her cluttered desk. A viewscreen appeared on the small space that was not covered with bits and pieces. Twiki set Dr. Theo on the desk, so that the little computer could scan the contract.

"This is quite unheard of!" Dr. Theo stated, sounding as appalled as only a computer could get. "What you are asking for is beyond our power to grant!"

"A tax rebate on my franchise in New Chicago? Plus a discount on transport fees for goods sent through New Chicago territory? That's not very much to ask for, Dr. Theophilus."

"You are asking us to forego a considerable revenue!" Dr. Theo huffed.

"You are asking me to put my life on the line!" Zelda countered. "My contacts Outside tell me there's a war brewing, and your missing missy'll probably be caught right in the middle of it. And I don't want to be around when the whatsis hits!"

Dr. Theo blinked furiously, as he communicated silently with his cohorts in New Chicago.

"You may have your tax rebate," he told Zelda. "And you may transport through New Chicago District for a fee reduced by 10%, but only for a period of five solar years, after which we will renegotiate. Is that acceptable?"

Zelda shrugged. "It'll do," she said. With a flourish, she pressed her thumbprint onto the plastic of the contract. Dr. Theo's electronic pattern was similarly imprinted, making it officially binding on both parties.

Zelda smiled at Buck, then turned to Wilma. "We leave at dawn," she told the other woman. "I mean dawn Outside, not what they tell us it is here. Ichabod will pick you up at your hotel. I've arranged for you to stay at the Statler--it's got atmosphere."

"That's--kind of you," Wilma said, through

stiff lips. Buck could tell it was taking an effort for her to be pleasant to Zelda, but he didn't know why. If they were both Deerings-- To break the ice that had suddenly infused the atmosphere, he picked up a piece of pottery and looked at it, then realized that it was the handle of a faucet.

"Where did all this come from?" Buck asked, waving at the oddments.

"From the Old City, mostly. The Broes get it for me." Zelda rummaged in the mess on her desk. "Part of the fun of a place like this is figuring out what the stuff was used for. Now this--we can't understand it." It was a small plastic object, rounded in shape, with a deep groove running through the circumference. Zelda turned the thing around in her hands. "It's not a wheel, because there's no place for an axle. It's not a ball, because the sides are flattened. It's not edible, and it never was. We don't know what it is, or what it does--do you?"

Buck took the thing and recognized it, but he didn't know how to tell this product of the 25th century what a yo-yo was--and he wasn't too sure she'd believe him if he did. He put the thing in his pocket with a shrug.

"Don't know either, hey? Well--someone must. Maybe the one who's been sending the distress signals."

Ichabod reappeared. "Ms. Deering, the signals have ceased."

"What!" Wilma sounded alarmed.

"Don't worry, Colonel. The signals always stop when it gets dark--I mean, real dark, real Outside time, not the standardized pushbutton clocks the computers use." Zelda's bitterness was evident. Buck smiled and began to herd Wilma and Twiki out the door.

"If it's that late, maybe we'd better get on to our hotel and get some rest. Zelda, it's been nice meeting you."

Wilma protested. "Captain Rogers, I am in command here!" she snapped, oblivious of the listening Ichabod.

"Colonel Deering," Buck muttered under his breath, "as soon as we're safely out of the public eye, you're going to tell me a few things. Meanwhile, we're representing New Chicago, so straighten up and fly right!"

Their belongings were already up in their room at the hotel when they arrived. "Zelda thinks of everything," Wilma fumed. She glared at the old-fashioned beds that stood in the middle of the floor, instead of being fold-away bunks, and she kicked at the chintz curtains that draped around the window. The window, like all the windows in the hotel, was a sham, a screen that could be programmed for any view, but Wilma ignored the rolling countryside that fascinated Buck.

"Zelda's very efficient," Buck agreed. "Wilma, if we're getting into a war--I want to know what's going on. You and Zelda have the same last name,

for instance. You're not sisters, or something like that?"

"Not quite. Cousins," Wilma said, perching on the edge of one of the twin beds. "Her father and mine are--were--brothers. We grew up together. Of course, as we got older, our aims in life changed. She went into the Cultural Directorate, I went into Defense, and we didn't see each other for a while."

Wilma started to pace. "Buck--it happened about ten years ago. It was my first independent command. I was to take a squadron out, to run protection for an archeological dig. Zelda was on that dig. They were exploring the caves near a place called Pittsburgh, where there had been metal-working--

"That area was dangerous! During the Great Holocaust, nuclear bombs had made parts of that place radioactive, and mining operations had caused shifts in the stresses of the Earth--the whole place was unstable. We'd had warning of a possible earth tremor--

"At any rate--I led my group in, and picked up all of the archeologists--all but one."

"Zelda?" Buck guessed.

Wilma nodded. "I've always run my command by the book, as you call it. She was supposed to join the main party at a certain time. We waited until the very last minute, but she didn't show up, and there was no message from her--what could I do?" Wilma turned to Buck in distress. "What could anyone do?"

Buck frowned. "It's a helluva decision to have to make, Wilma, and I've sure you did what you had to," he said gently.

"I suppose you would have gone back for her?" Wilma shot at him.

Buck let out a long breath. "I don't know. Maybe--but I've been lucky, and you had a lot of other people to think about. Since she's here to talk about it, I take it Zelda was alive?"

Wilma nodded. "She'd been trapped in a cave-in. She crawled out in time to see my squadron disappear over the mountains. She spent time with the Mutants, and it changed her. She showed up about five years ago, here in New Newyork, with a whole load of antiquities. She's been trading in them ever since."

Buck groaned. "Where does this leave our mission?" he asked.

"If you mean, can we trust Zelda to get us there, the answer is, 'Yes,'" Wilma said. "She's got a reputation for being a hard bargainer, but she's always been scrupulously honest about contracts. Of course, there's the problem of getting back--"

"There is that one little thing," Buck admitted. "Well, Wilma, we'll just have to get out of this one by ourselves. What about some dinner?"

Wilma made an impatient sound. "Buck Rogers, must you always think about eating?"

"Be-be-be--let's see some hot spots, Buck," Twiki interrupted enthusiastically.

Buck shrugged. "We're here, Wilma, so we might as well enjoy it while we can."

Wilma gave up. "Just remember, we're supposed to be ready early!" she warned them, as they headed down to the hotel restaurant to sample some of the famed New Newyork Chicken Soup and Chopped Liver, the recipe for which had been discovered in the original building of the Newyork District complex.

Zelda was as good as her word. The city was still darkened when Buck and Wilma stumbled out of bed and into Zelda's arms. Ichabod had the go-cart ready. Zelda, who had exchanged her caftan for a serviceable khaki safari suit and stout walking shoes, supervised the packing.

"Ichabod, you're in charge here," she told her henchman. "There's a shipment due in from Mexico District--decontaminate it before you put the goods out; they're having some kind of locust plague down there." She seemed to check off a mental list of 'things to do,' then said, "Mrs. Biltmore will be in for her dinnerware--make her pay cash, her voucher bounced last time."

As Zelda gave a few more instructions, Wilma tapped her foot. "You could have done this before," Wilma finally said. "If your Mutant friends are having a war, we don't have much time."

"Whoa now, this is the second time I've heard about a war, and I don't like it," Buck said. "Who's fighting who, and why isn't the computer council doing something about it?"

"The computer council only runs the New Newyork District as far as the forcefield," Zelda explained. "'Outside' is all wild, and no one gives a good goddam what Mutants do to each other." Buck noted the bitterness in her voice whenever she spoke about the Outside.

"Why should we interfere?" Wilma countered. "They don't have weapons to--"

"Maybe not guns," Zelda said, "but an arrow can kill you as dead as a blaster, and it's a lot easier to make one. The Hissons are trying to get the Broes and the Jayzees to sit down and talk peace, but there's no talking to the Jayzees, they just want to yell. The Broes have been trading with the Hissons for years, since the Great Holocaust."

"The Hissons? The Broes?" Buck echoed.

Zelda made an impatient noise. "The Broes are what was left in the Old City after the evacuation. The Hissons live in the forests around the forcefield. The Broes trade with the Hissons for furs and skins and meat, and the Hissons trade with me for things the City can give, like medicines and metals."

Wilma seemed to be growing more uncomfortable as they headed closer to the boundary of New Newyork District. "They're all Mutants anyway," she said, shivering slightly. "They don't matter."

Zelda stopped the go-cart. "Listen, Colonel," she said in a low and deadly voice, "the Hissons are my friends, and the Broes are their allies. They are people, human beings, just like the rest of us. The only difference is they've managed to live outside this--this plastic world." She gestured at the towering buildings of New Newyork District.

"Understand something else, Wilma," she went on. "Once we get out of the forcefield, I'm in charge. I'll tell you where to go, and when to go, and what to do when we get where we're going. As we say in Newyork, Wilma, this is my turf. Captain Rogers should understand that part of it, I think."

Buck laid his hand on Wilma's arm. "She's right, you know. She's the guide. We can't find whoever's sending that message without her help."

Dr. Theo's calm voice broke the deadlock. "I suggest that this argument be settled at another time. In any jurisdictional dispute, it is the computer council that makes the final decision. I therefore insist that we put these human, emotional jealousies aside and consider only the mission. If, as Ms. Deering has stated, there is violence brewing among the Mutants, then it is of the utmost urgency that we remove the survivor, assuming there is one, from this vicinity."

"Be-be-be--you tell 'em, Doc!" Twiki applauded.

Zelda and Wilma glared at each other. Then the short woman set the go-cart in motion again, and they were off, rolling down a ramp on a street that got more and more pot-holed as they approached the shimmering grey-green barrier that separated New Newyork from the surrounding countryside.

A bored guard was on duty at the checkpoint shed.

"Hi, Fred," Zelda greeted him. "Papers in order, same as usual."

"Okay, Ms. Deering," the guard said. He punched buttons on the small mechanism in front of him. A section of the forcefield gave way, and Buck saw the open sky beyond it, tinged with dawn's pinks and lavenders.

The go-cart rolled out into an open field. Behind them, the forcefield closed down again, sealing the city off from its environment.

Wilma looked around. They were following a sketchy trail down a rolling hill. All around them were wildflowers, and a stand of trees ringed the field.

"Is this all there is?" Wilma demanded.

Zelda shrugged, her mouth twisted in a wry smile. "Sure. No one goes OUT; the forcefield is to keep people from coming IN--except that the only people around are the Hissons, and they don't want to come in."

Wilma looked around warily, one hand hovering near her blaster. Buck, on the other hand, was delighted to be out in the open. He stared at the deepening blue of the sky, punctuated with small white clouds.

"Why would anyone want to stay inside, breathing recycled air, when they could have this?" he wondered out loud.

Zelda threw him an approving glance. "You like it?"

"Like I said, I'm a pilot, ma'am. I want that wild blue yonder," Buck said enthusiastically. "When do we get into the trees?"

"Trees?" Wilma asked sharply.

"Trees," Buck repeated. "Hell, I wouldn't mind seeing poison ivy. Zelda, do you know how long it's been since I saw a real, honest-to-God, Earthly tree?"

"You like trees?"

"He even grows them in his quarters," Wilma said disparagingly.

They soon entered the forest. The branches of the maples and oaks closed over them, throwing dappled patches of shade across the trail. Insects buzzed in the low bushes, and something rustled in the dry leaves that lay on the forest floor. Zelda maneuvered her go-cart through the forest carefully, while Wilma's eyes darted everywhere.

Buck tried to cheer Wilma up. "Isn't that a rabbit?" he asked, as something grey bounded across the trail.

"I wouldn't know," Wilma said through stiff lips.

"Be-be-be--this is fun!" Twiki said.

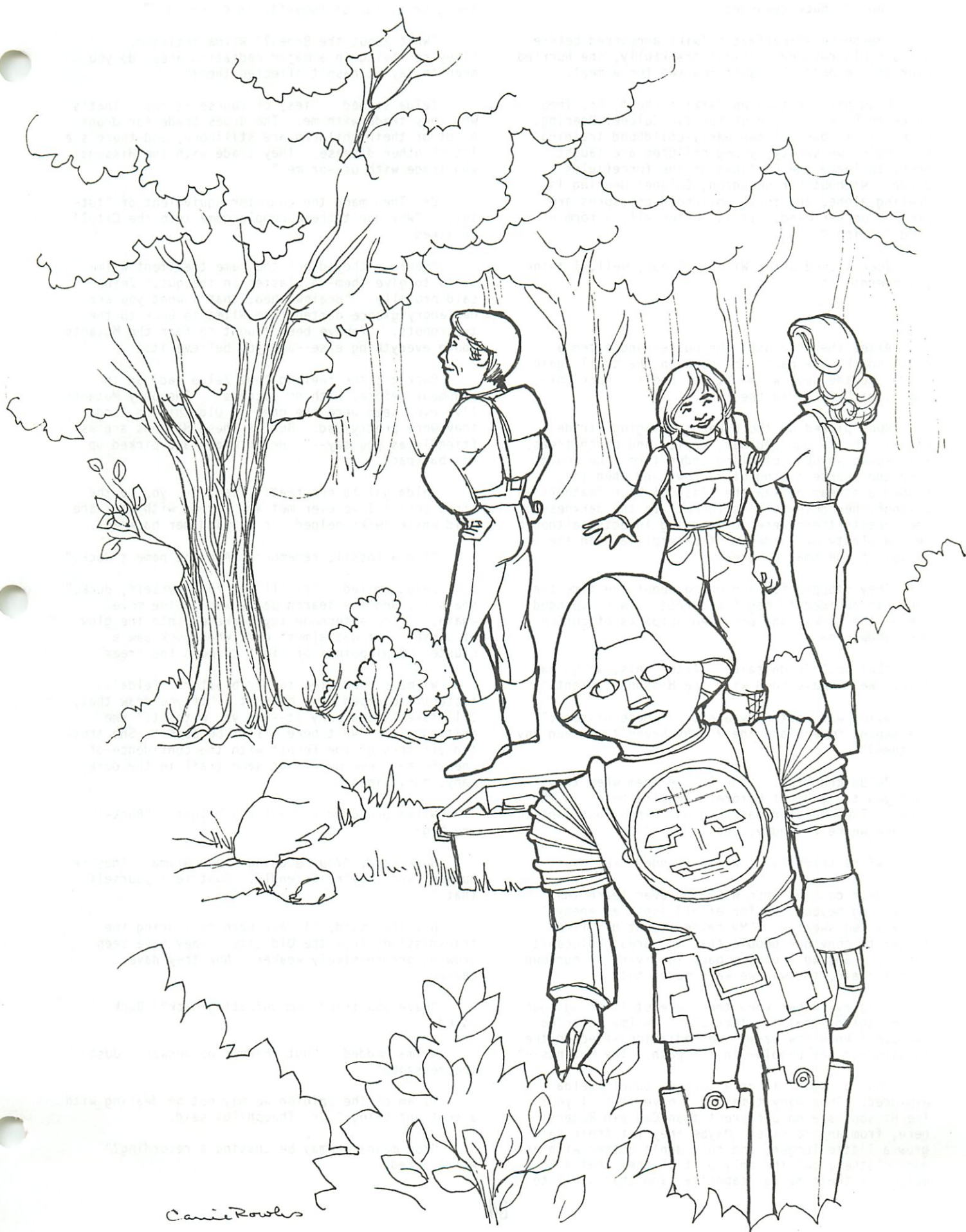
Zelda glanced at her cousin. "Wilma's afraid of the Mutant Menace," she sneered. She pulled the go-cart into a clearing, and hopped out. "First pit stop, folks. From here on we walk, so put your hiking gear on, Captain."

Buck nodded, then drew Wilma aside. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "We're not out more than two hours, and you're acting like a rookie on a new planet."

Wilma licked her lips. "Buck--you don't understand. Ever since I was a little girl, I was told never, never to go Outside. You've seen what the Mutants are like around New Chicago--they're not human!"

Buck stared at Wilma, wondering why the always unflappable Colonel Wilma Deering was almost verging on hysteria. "Listen, Wilma, you've been lightyears away, to hundreds of planets. You've faced things with four arms, things that could change their shapes, and things with no shape at all. This is your home, your own planet, and the people on it are humans! And from what Zelda says, they're friendly, at least to her. For God's sake--or for the sake of the Mission--pretend you're somewhere else, if you have to, but snap to." He frowned. "And even if the Mutants hereabouts weren't friendly, why should that bother you? Who was it saved me from a Mutant attack in Old Chicago?"

Wilma shifted her face from him. "That--that was different."



Carrie Rowles

"How?" Buck demanded.

"Be-be-be--Breakfast!" Twiki announced before Wilma could respond. Almost thankfully, she hurried over to the portable table now set for a meal.

From his position on Twiki's chest, Dr. Theo spoke to Buck: "You must forgive Colonel Deering, Buck. It is part of the early-childhood training. For their own safety, young children are taught never to leave the confines of the forcefields alone. Without her squadron, Colonel Deering is feeling alone, and these childhood pressures are preying on her mind. It is, after all, a form of conditioning."

Buck stared after Wilma. "Yeah, well, I think you overdid it."

After they had used the bushes and eaten a light snack, the party got back on the trail again. Zelda led the way, Wilma at her heels. Buck followed, with Twiki in the rear.

Buck picked up the hiker's swinging stride easily. He recognized oak, maple, and birch trees, with sumac shrubs spindling under them. He could hear the hoarse cawing of a crow, and when they passed a stream he saw the flash of blue feathers as a kingfisher dove for its lunch. In the darkness of the forests there were no stinging insects, although he saw plenty of evidence of caterpillars on the leaves of the smaller trees.

They stopped for a nooning about the time that Buck had decided to beg for a rest. Twiki upended one of the packs, and provided hotpacks of coffee and sandwiches.

"Eat up," Zelda said. "After this, we go native. We'll have food with the Hissons tonight."

Wilma was instantly alert. "These Hissons," she began, "where are they? Why haven't we seen any of them?"

Zelda chuckled. "You'll see them when they want you to, and not before. They're here, in the trees. They've been watching us. They just want to be sure we're friendly, that's all."

"We're friendly?" Wilma sounded skeptical.

"Dear cousin, when will you ever learn that everything beyond the forcefield isn't an enemy?" Zelda asked sweetly. "My father spent his life trying to convince people that the Great Holocaust was over, and we could go back to living on our own planet again, the way we were meant to!"

"And my father knew there are still things out there, things that are terrible!" Wilma retorted. "We don't know how badly the radiation affected the animals--or the people--in its path. The Mutants--"

"Oh, go stuff it up a torpedo tube!" Zelda exploded. "How many times do I have to tell you? The Hissons are no different than Captain Rogers here, from anyone else. Maybe they let their hair grow a little longer, and they don't bother with as many clothes, but the only part of them that's mutant is their mental capacity, and that's all to

the good as far as humanity is concerned!"

"What about the Broes?" Wilma insisted. "They're living in a major radiation area--do you mean to say it hasn't affected them?"

Zelda sighed. "Yes, of course it has. That's why they trade with me. The Broes trade for drugs. A lot of their children are stillborn, and there's a lot of other disease. They trade with the Hissons, who trade with us--or me."

Dr. Theo made the computer equivalent of "tut-tut." "Why don't these people come into the City?" he asked.

"Because they'd get the same treatment Wilma wants to give them--a blaster in the gut," Zelda said brutally. "Brainwashed, that's what you are." Her angry glance darted from Wilma to Buck to the two robots. "You've been taught to fear the Mutants above everything else--and you believe it!"

Buck got the feeling that Zelda had had this argument before, with no success. "The only Mutants I've ever seen were the ones in Old Chicago, and they were pretty bad. But if these Hissons are as friendly as you say--" He shrugged and picked up his backpack.

Zelda got to her feet. "Captain, you're the first person I've ever met who agrees with me," she said while Twiki helped her on with her backpack.

"I'm a fossil, remember? And the name's Buck."

Zelda smiled. "You'll see for yourself, Buck," she said, and the search party was on the move again, as the afternoon sky darkened into the glow of sunset. It was almost dark when Buck saw a cluster of pinpoints of light through the trees.

Wilma's hand flew to her blaster. Zelda's instantly clamped down over it. "If you draw that, I'll take it and bury it--and you with it!" she gritted out. "Wait here. I'll be back." She trotted off through the forest with the confidence of one who had been over that same trail in the dark many, many times.

Wilma produced a small flashlight. "Buck--" she began.

Buck said, "You're doing fine, Wilma. They're humans, and they're friendly. Just tell yourself that."

Dr. Theo said, "I have been monitoring the transmissions from the Old City. They have been growing progressively weaker. Now they have ceased."

"Have you tried communicating back?" Buck asked.

Wilma nodded. "But there's no answer. Just the message."

"I am of the opinion we may not be dealing with a sentient being," Dr. Theophilus said.

"You mean--we may be chasing a recording?" Wilma asked.

"Even so, the information contained on that recording will be invaluable," Dr. Theophilus said. "We must continue until we can retrieve it."

Three points of light detached themselves from the cluster in the distance and approached the small clearing. They were pine-knot torches carried by three men in leather leggings. Buck noted that neither their impassive faces nor their bare chests showed any sign of the leprous tumors that had afflicted the Mutants infesting Old Chicago. Their dark hair was worn long, in two braids, and their faces remained stolid and untouched by any emotion as Zelda introduced them. "This is Cat-Killer, this is Iron-Bender, and this is Far-Seer. These are my friends, Wilma and Buck, of the City. They come--"

"We know why they come," Far-Seer said. His voice was deep and gentle. "They seek the one who lives no longer. There is no one there, no living thing."

Wilma's mouth opened, then shut. Buck said, "Are you sure?"

Far-Seer nodded.

"We must go on anyway," Dr. Theophilus stated. The three Hissons turned to stare at the blinking computer attached to Twiki. "Even if the people who left the message are gone, we want to know all we can about them."

Cat-Killer said, "What Far-Seer says is true. There is no need to go farther."

"Our mission is to find out where that transmission is coming from," Wilma said sharply. "That's what we were sent here to do." She swallowed deeply. "Well--will you help us?"

Cat-Killer looked from Wilma to Zelda. "This is your kinswoman?" he asked the shorter woman.

Zelda nodded and Cat-Killer turned back toward the Hisson camp. He beckoned the others to follow him.

Buck didn't know what to expect of Mutants, but he was pleased to see that the Hissons looked normal. Their camp consisted of rounded hits of deer-skins laid over wooden frameworks, set in a circle around a central campfire. A small fire burned in front of each hut, where women in leather dresses cooked in clay or metal pots. Some of the fires had spits with meat being roasted; in some there were ears of corn or potatoes baking. Buck's mouth watered at the smell of hot, fresh food.

Cat-Killer stopped in front of one of the wigwams, where a stout middle-aged woman was stirring something in an iron pot. She glanced briefly up at Zelda with a quizzical smile, then watched curiously as the Hisson male led the City folk into the tent. Buck had to bend almost double to enter the tent. Cat-Killer jammed the torch into a holder near the center of the wigwam. By its flickering light, Buck could just make out a pile of furs in one corner.

"Welcome to our house," Cat-Killer said. Red-Leaf will bring food. Then we will talk."

Wilma looked around. "Where's Zelda?" she

whispered. "I thought she was right behind us?"

Buck shrugged. "I thought she was ahead of you," he said. The Hisson woman brought earthenware bowls of stew and horn spoons. Buck accepted a bowl and spoon from her. "Bon appetit, Wilma," he said, saluting her with the bowl. Dropping down to sit cross-legged on the dirt floor, he spooned up the stew, savoring the taste of venison and natural herbs.

Wilma looked dubiously at the bowl, but followed his example.

Before they had finished their meal, the leather flap that served as a door was pushed aside. Zelda and Cat-Killer came into the wigwam, followed by a young boy of about eight years old.

"I knew you'd come back," the boy said as though completing a discussion already begun. "Did you bring me something from the City?"

Cat-Killer looked sternly at the boy, but Zelda enfolded him in her arms.

"Stormy! Of course I came back, don't I always? And I got you a new thing, a special learning thing--" She took an abacus out of her pack and showed it to the boy. "It's to help you count. When you use this, you can understand numbers--"

The boy took the abacus carefully, but Buck could tell that numbers were of no real interest to him. "Hey, fella, there's something else," Buck said. "Have you got a piece of string?"

He met with a blank stare from all sides. He tried again. "A thread, a thong--long and thin--what you sew things together with?"

The boy nodded and darted out of the wigwam. Zelda looked after him and Wilma stared at her cousin.

"So that's why--" Wilma began.

"Cat-Killer found me half-dead with the cold, starving," Zelda said, her face tight with anger. "After you left me all alone, Colonel Deering. He fed me, gave me clothes, brought me over the mountains, and got me here. Red-Leaf was near her time, and he needed a second wife. When I'm not here, Red-Leaf looks after Stormy as if he were her own son. They understand about my business. I bring medicine to them so the other women don't have to lose their babies the way Red-Leaf did, and they give me the foolish things the Broes get from the Old City, so I can sell them to fools, and so it goes--"

Stormy returned with a length of leather thong. Buck didn't know how well it would work, but he cut a strip, twisted it, and dug out the little plastic doo-dad from Zelda's office. The improvised string held firm. Stormy's eyes grew big as he watched the plastic wheel ride up and down, winding and unwinding on the string.

"Here--it's yours," Buck handed the boy the yo-yo.

Zelda's mouth opened in amazement. Suddenly she started to laugh. "Oh my God, it's a toy! What

a joke on those jaspers at the Antiquities Society!"

Wilma wasn't interested in toys. "What about our mission?" she asked, turning to Cat-Killer. "Will your people lead us to the Old City?"

Cat-Killer stared at Wilma. "You have been told there is trouble there?"

"We know--something about Broes and Jayzees--" Buck said.

"Yes. The Broes are our friends. They trade with us. They get metals from the Old City, and they catch fishes in the seas. This is good, for without the fishes we get ill and die."

"Probably lack of iodine," Buck muttered, determined to take the matter up with Dr. Theophilus at a later time. Aloud he said, "What about these Jayzees? Where do they come from, and what do they want?"

"They come from the South, and they want the metals in the Old City," Cat-Killer said. "The Broes will share these things for trades. The Jayzees are no good. They do not trade--they take what they want, and leave nothing."

"Be-be-be--not our kind," Twiki commented.

"There is no way of dealing with them?" Dr. Theophilus asked.

"None. They do not come here," Cat-Killer said. "They stay in the south. If they come here, we will fight them with our friends the Broes."

"That's what I've been afraid of," Wilma said. "We must find that message before any such war breaks out. That message and the person who sent it. If someone's alive, we'll get them out; if the message is on tape, we'll take it. We can offer--"

"Zelda has explained all," Cat-Killer said. "She says you are of her father's kindred. That is enough. I will send to the Broes tonight. They will meet us at the Iron Road in two days' time. They will take you over the water to the Old City. But there is nothing for you there."

"We'll be the judges of that," Wilma said.

Cat-Killer pulled the furs out of the pile. "You may be comfortable," he said. "Tomorrow, we walk far."

Zelda arranged the furs. Wilma stared around while Buck tried to remember all he had ever known about the customs of the Northeastern Indians.

"I'd prefer privacy," Wilma whispered to him.

"When in Rome--or in an Indian Camp--" Buck whispered back and rolled himself up in the nearest furs. He grinned in the dark as he heard Wilma hesitantly follow suit.

They were wakened by the sounds of wildlife around the camp, the chitter of chipmunks and the sharp reek of a skunk.

Zelda entered the wigwam with a clay pot of fresh water. "Rise and shine," she said cheerfully. "Cat-Killer wants to make good time. We've got fifty miles to go to the Iron Road, and that's quite a stretch for anyone, and especially people not used to moving on two feet."

Zelda looked chipper and neat. Wilma's long blonde hair was tangled, and even after a night's sleep she looked weary. Buck ached all over, and could have used a hot bath--or a Jacuzzi! Only Twiki seemed as alert as Zelda, bustling around importantly while Dr. Theophilus blinked with impatience.

"The signal is very strong today," the little computer said. "I am beginning to formulate a theory as to the source of this signal--"

They had barely finished a quick rinse when Zelda called out, "Let's go!" Wilma and Buck shouldered their packs, Cat-Killer led the way, and they were off down the forest paths once again.

Their way lay downhill now, through second-growth forest, past a chattering stream that made Buck long wistfully for his fishing equipment, forever destroyed in the Great Holocaust that had destroyed so much else, of greater importance than a few bamboo poles and some feather flies. They stooped at noon in another clearing, where Buck could make out the charred remains of a stone building and the rusty traces of a railroad line. Lunch was a brief affair, and they set out again quickly. As the day drew to a close, they worked their way toward a silvery expanse of water first glimpsed fitfully between trees in the distance.

"That is the Big Sea," Cat-Killer said. "We camp beside it tonight," They made their way through the trees to an outcropping. The water glistened in an unbroken sheet to the horizon, where Buck could barely make out a shadowy something over the water.

"There lies the Iron Road," Cat-Killer said. "Here we make camp." He unhooked his pack. Buck and Wilma sank to the ground, totally exhausted.

Twiki trotted around, setting up a small tent, laying out a fire, and producing cans of pre-cooked meat and vegetables.

Zelda frowned. "I thought I told you to leave that home," she scolded the ambuquad.

"Be-be-be--nothing else fit to eat," Twiki said.

"I packed it," Wilma said. "I didn't know whether we'd get anything else."

Zelda sighed. "I'd hoped this trip might convince you that there is a life for Earth outside the forcefields," she said. "The Hissons have found it. They live as part of Nature, they don't try to fight it and bend it and--"

"And they die of diseases we've long since eliminated," Wilma said. "And these Broes--what are they like?"

"Not so peaceful as the Hissons," Zelda agreed.

"And the Jayzees? They sound like the Mutants around New Chicago. Why aren't they under control?" Wilma demanded.

"No one to control them between here and New Chicago," Zelda reminded her. "New York was spared because its population was able to evacuate and most of the governing personages were not there when the Holocaust began. They were at a meeting in this place, this playground--"

"Who was left?" Buck asked.

"Not too many, I'm afraid," Dr. Theo went on. "These Broes are their descendants."

Buck rubbed at the back of his neck. "I just wish I could remember what that newspaper said," he muttered.

Wilma stared at him. "Newspaper?"

"Yeah--the one I read the morning I left. I've a feeling it's important. It's like an itch I can't scratch. It was something about a meeting at a big resort hotel where world leaders could sit down and thrash out a final disarmament treaty-- Damn!" Buck threw a pine cone at the fire, which flared up to echo his annoyance. "I can even remember a picture of the guy--funny, he was holding a cat--but I can't recall the story or the headline."

"It'll come to you, Buck," Dr. Theo assured him.

"Sleep now," Cat-Killer told them. "Tomorrow we meet the Broes at the Iron Road, and you will find what you came for."

Buck's sleep was troubled: he heard snatches of old songs, and little flickers of memory, the faces of old friends came to taunt him, only to vanish in the flames. When dawn arrived, he was almost grateful to be back on his aching feet again. It gave him something to think about besides the past.

They walked along the edge of the sea. It was not a sandy shore, but a mass of pinkish rocks. Something tickled at Buck's memory, yet seemed--incredibly wrong. Buck looked down at his feet, then looked across the wide waters. He remembered the last time he'd been to New York. With a sense of shock, Buck realized he was standing on top of the Palisades--a mere five feet above the water line!

"The Iron Road," announced Cat-Killer, pointing to the towers before them.

Tears stung Buck's eyes. The George Washington Bridge hovered a few inches above the water; waves lapped at the lower levels.

"Do we cross it?" Wilma asked.

"Only with the protection of the Broes," Cat-Killer said. He raised a hand in signal. A flotilla of canoes launched from the small islands in the middle of the sea. In the lead was a tall black man, his hair flying wildly around his head. He

carried a baseball bat carved with elaborate designs. As he drew nearer, Buck could see that he wore a necklace of paper clips and more paper clips hung from his ears.

"Well come, Hisson," the leader said, in an accent so broad Buck could barely make it out. "I got the signal. What you bring us this time?"

"These are people from the City. They come to search the Old Places." Cat-Killer nodded towards Zelda. "Big Broe Alee, this is my woman, and these are her kindred. They come with the good-will of the Hissons."

Big Broe Alee stared at Buck and Wilma. "What that?" he demanded, pointing at Twiki and Dr. Theo.

"They're kindred, too," Zelda said hurriedly. "They're to help find someone."

"I thought they might be mo-sheens," Alee said. "We hear Jayzees coming, looking for mo-sheens. We let you over the Iron Road, then we trade you your city things for boats--"

"No. You must take us, in the boats," Wilma insisted.

"Getting seasick, Wilma?" Buck teased her. As usual, the joke went over her head.

"I'm not good at canoe paddling, Captain Rogers, and I don't want to learn now," Wilma said. "Zelda--"

The dark woman shook her head. "Sorry, this is as far as I go. My contract calls for me to bring you here. It doesn't call for me to follow you into the city. Good luck, Colonel!"

Wilma reached for her blaster. Zelda held it out to her with a mocking bow. "Here you are, Colonel. I've left you one charge. You can waste it on me, or you can keep it for the Jayzees--you never know when you'll need it."

Alee grinned at Buck and Wilma. "Comin', then? We'll take you down the city, but watch out for them Jayzees!"

Wilma stepped gingerly into the canoe. Buck lifted Twiki into another one, and sat behind him. Dr. Theo's lights began to flicker.

"I believe the signal is coming from those buildings," he said. A note of excitement seemed to enter into the programmed voice of the tiny computer. "Continue on this course! We are quite, quite close!"

The paddlers, all dark, well-muscled men and women, bent to their tasks. The canoes shot across the sea that had been the Hudson River and into the canyons of New York City.

Buck felt an ache in his throat. Somewhere, under tons of water, lay the city of his dreams. As a boy he had heard about its troubles, had seen its disintegration, had witnessed its gradual rebuilding. He had read about its people in stories and newspapers and had seen it on hundreds of television shows. Some of his most memorable times had been in



this city. Now, here it was, somewhere under the ripples: stores and apartments, works of priceless art, gems worth a king's ransom, all forever gone.

They paddled past windows of high-rises, sealed against the air pollution of the late 20th century, the furniture inside preserved from the encroaching water. Buck felt like a voyeur as he peered in at living rooms and kitchens, all devoid of life.

"What's the good word?" he asked Dr. Theophilus listlessly. The empty city depressed him. How could he expect that anything had survived here?

"Mark seven point five, four point two, one point six, zero!" The computer practically shouted. "Right here! Here!"

"Hold up!" Buck yelled. "This is it!"

"Nothin' here," Alee objected.

"Dr. Theo says this is the place," Buck insisted. Climbing up on a narrow window ledge, he peered in at the window. The room was an office, with a desk, a typewriter, chairs, and an abstract mural facing the window. As her canoe started bobbing about, Wilma clutched at the window-ledge. "Are you sure, Dr. Theophilus?" she asked.

"Quite. This is definitely the location of the signal." The computer did not even sound miffed at having his words doubted, Buck noted.

"Well, let's get in," Buck said. He helped Wilma onto the ledge next to him, then bent over to assist Twiki and Dr. Theophilus up.

"We got trouble!" Alee shouted. "Here come the Jayzees!"

Warned by the shouts, Buck looked around. A second flotilla was rapidly approaching from the south; it appeared to be manned by an uncouth band of raggedly-clad ruffians waving spears. Big Broe Alee's men raised their bows and let fly a shower of arrows. The Jayzees drew back, but did not stop their paddling.

"We gotta git outa here," Alee ordered. "You on you own now."

Wilma yelled, but the canoes were on their way back to the islands, leaving Buck, Wilma, and the two machines perched precariously on the window ledge.

"Open it up, Twiki!" Buck ordered.

"Be-be-be--no can do, Buck."

"Just break the glass!" Wilma shouted. The Jayzees were getting closer, but were still out of blaster-range.

"This is not glass," Dr. Theo announced. "It is most unusual. I have never met with this particular compound before."

"I'm not asking you to shake its hand; just get the window open!" Buck said.

"That's impossible," Dr. Theo told him.

The first of the Jayzee spears bounced off the top of the window. Buck grabbed for it, but it sank into the water.

"How, impossible?"

"This window is made of a most extraordinary plastic. I believe it may be reinforced with solar electrical cells. I have no idea how it came to be in this particular building. No one at the time of its erection could have manufactured such a window."

"Great!" Buck fired his blaster. The lead Jayzee canoe went up in a cloud of steam. Two more spears missed the beleaguered party. "How did the people inside get fresh air?"

"There appears to be a ventilation system outlet above the window," Dr. Theo said. "However, there is no opening large enough for entry."

Buck dodged another spear and fired at another Jayzee. "So what do we do now? Say 'Open Sesame'?"

"'Open Sesame'?" Wilma echoed.

"'Open Sesame!'" Buck shot back.

Behind them, the window opened. They tumbled in, and the window closed again; the Jayzees raged outside.

"Somebody had a sense of humor," Buck commented, prowling around the office. "Dr. Theo, can you pinpoint those signals?"

Twiki was carrying his companion around the office. "I believe--yes. They are emanating from behind this wall." Dr. Theo faced the mural.

Wilma, who obviously had not recognized Buck's "Open Sesame" reference, and who had been looking disturbed by the ease of their entry, turned and glared at the wall. "What's behind there?"

Buck rested against the edge of the desk. "Probably nothing but a tape deck," he decided. He leaned back against the pen-set--and the abstract mural slid back to reveal a bank of glowing, humming machines.

"What the Hell is that?!" Buck exclaimed.

"I am a Beta-Five computer, capable of independent thought," the machine said, in a surprisingly feminine voice. "I have been deprived of data, and am out of communication with my programmers. What is your designation?"

Buck stared at Wilma, who stared at the enormous computer. It was Dr. Theophilus who said, "We are here in answer to your distress signal, broadcast since you were released from beneath the water line."

"Explain that statement?" Beta-Five said.

"This room has been below sea level for at least four hundred years," Dr. Theophilus said. "By comparing the markings on the outside of this building with similar data, I conclude that the signal was heard only after the window, which provides power though the solar-electric cells implanted within it, was clear of the water. It is logical to

assume, Beta-Five, that your programmers and operators are dead."

Beta-Five assimilated this information with much whirring and clicking, then said, "That is impossible. Your data is faulty. Such an occurrence was not foreseen by my programmers. Identify yourselves properly."

Dr. Theophilus said, "We represent the New Chicago Directorate. I am Dr. Theophilus, and this is Captain Rogers and Colonel Deering. We came in answer to your signal. In the event that you cannot be removed--and I see no way of doing so without extensive damage to your circuits--we suggest that you discharge into my circuits all data of which you are possessed. In that way, the information will not be lost."

Beta-Five thought this over, with much blinking of lights. Then she spoke in the voice of a stubborn female: "Until I receive further programming from my Source, I cannot discharge such information. Your designation is improper. It is my assumption that you are attempting to use me for illicit purposes. Under these circumstances, I must close down until proper programming is initiated."

The blinking lights dimmed. Buck grinned. Beta-Five was indulging in a fit of sulks.

Dr. Theo's lights blinked furiously. "What is the matter with her, Buck? She doesn't believe me!"

"I understand how she feels," Buck said sympathetically. "Wilma, what's happening out there?"

Despite the proven indestructibility of the window, Wilma sidled over to it carefully and peered out. "The Jayzees are having a conference," she reported. "This window will keep them out, but Buck--it's keeping us in, too! We can breathe, but there's nothing to eat in here, is there?" Wilma's voice was taut, on the edge of panic. Buck realized it must seem to her as though her worst nightmare had come true: trapped, Outside her safe world, with Mutants raging about her.

Twiki made an inspection tour. "Be-be-be--not a crumb," he said.

Buck turned to Beta-Five. "How do we get out of here?"

"I am capable of releasing the window locks," Beta-Five said huffily. "But if you are unethical beings, you should be retained here until the authorities arrive."

Dr. Theophilus seemed to be getting huffy himself. "We are the authorities," he said. "I am the chief of the Computer Council of New Chicago. I am at this moment in communication with my colleagues, both in New Chicago and in New Newyork. We are eager to receive any data you may have concerning the event we know as the Great Holocaust."

"The period in Europe, 1932 to 1945, during which six million persons of the Jewish faith, and many million others, primarily gypsies and Middle European Catholics, were exterminated--"

"Not that one," Buck said. "We're talking about World War III."

Beta-Five's light array blinked rapidly. "Such an event has not been programmed. The meeting of the Heads of State has been arranged. There will be no World War III."

"But there was!" Dr. Theo said.

"There cannot have been," Beta-Five replied, startled. "Agent code-named Gary Seven was to prevent such occurrence and--"

"That's it!" Buck yelled.

"What is?" Wilma asked from her post at the window.

"That's what's been bugging me--bothering me, I mean--all this trip. The guy who was supposed to arrange the peace conference that would stop the bomb factories."

"I heard the news just as I was about to suit up, on that last ride in the sky. This Gary Seven had dragged all the heads of State up to a resort in the Catskills, top-security, no one knew which it was. He was giving a news conference, holding that damned cat in his arms--and some little creep came belting out of the crowd and took a shot at him. I don't know what happened after that--I had to fly my plane, that was my mission, remember? But I kept thinking all the way up, what a dumb thing, that the man who could bring peace to the whole world was at the mercy of a nut with a Saturday Night Special."

Beta-Five seemed to be absorbing this story slowly. "My sensors indicate your body functions are those of one who speaks the truth," she said at last. "I must conclude that Gary Seven did not complete his mission."

"Obviously," Wilma snapped. "My guess is those Heads of State immediately thought they were being betrayed--"

"And someone pressed the wrong button," Buck finished. "What a sickening story."

Dr. Theo blinked at Beta-Five. "We must do all in our power to prevent human emotions from destroying the world yet again," he told Beta-Five. "Will you accept reality and discharge your information? It will fulfill the purpose of your programming: to assist humankind and achieve accord among them."

Beta-Five considered. "If my original programmers are no longer available, and if Gary Seven failed in his purpose, there is no point in my retaining this data."

"We ask only for data pertaining to the events immediately preceding your immersion," Dr. Theo told her soothingly.

"Prepare to receive data." Beta-Five whirred and clicked, and Dr. Theo's lights blinked frantically.

Wilma beckoned Buck over. "The Jayzees are regrouping. They'll probably make one more try before nightfall."

"Wilma," Buck said slowly, "I don't like to say this about your cousin, but--how much does Zelda hate you?"

Wilma threw him a startled glance. "Buck--she wouldn't leave us here--"

"Dr. Theo, what chance of getting a rescue plane in from New Newyork?" Buck shouted over to the small computer.

Dr. Theophilus stopped blinking and said, "It might take some time, Buck. After all, the entire Computer Council would have to agree, and they rarely agree on anything!"

"That's great!" Buck muttered. "Wilma, we'll just have to cross our fingers and hope that Big Broe Alee comes back to pick us up."

The Jayzees had worked themselves up for another assault. "Open the window, Beta-Five," Buck yelled. "Open Sesame, open sesame, open sesame!"

The window slid open. Wilma fired her blaster at the leader in his canoe. Buck aimed at the canoes behind the leader. A spear bounced off the building and another actually fell inside the room.

Wilma swore. "Damn, Buck, I'm running low!"

"Same here," Buck said as his blaster grew hot in his hands. "Zelda wasn't kidding when she told us she discharged them." Taking stock of the situation, he warned, "Get ready to wrestle, Wilma, we've got company!"

A wild-eyed Mutant launched herself through the window. Buck didn't know how to deal with a half-naked woman who wanted to slit his throat. Wilma, however, seemed to have no compunctions: she threw the woman back out the window into the water outside. A second woman and a man scrambled for finger-holds on the windowsill. While trying to kick the Mutant backwards, Buck and Wilma kept up a steady firing at the canoes from now dangerously overloaded weapons.

The Jayzees kept coming. But suddenly they shrieked as in terror, and from behind their canoes came a howl and a whoop and a shower of arrows.

"Hang in there, Wilma, here come the Broes!" Buck yelled. "Twiki, give us a hand! Get this garbage out of here!"

The ambuquad trundled obediently over to the window and threw the two Jayzees into their canoes. The Jayzees rowed rapidly away from the building. Most of the Broes paddled after them, hooting and yelling the while.

The chief Broe canoe docked next to the open window. Big Broe Alee stepped into the office and looked around with interest. Behind him came Zelda, and behind her, Cat-Killer.

Zelda strutted a little as she walked past Wilma. "Thought I might not come back, didn't you?"

Wilma bit back any retort. "I'm glad you did," she said quietly.

"You are kinfolk. We could do no less," Cat-Killer said. He had no interest in the luxurious office furniture, or even in Beta-Five. Big Broe Alee was already searching the desk drawers for trinkets.

"What will we do with Beta-Five?" Dr. Theo asked. "I have transmitted as much of her data as was not key-coded Confidential to my colleagues in New Chicago and New Newyork. We will have much to think over in the months ahead. But there is, as yet, the problem of Beta-Five's physical being. She cannot be removed from this room without structural damage, either to her or to the building."

Zelda appraised the office. "I could send one or two Cultural Consulate types over, but they wouldn't like to live here," she admitted.

Buck smiled suddenly. "Why don't you run tours?" he suggested. "You know--see the Old City--"

Zelda looked pityingly at Wilma. "Does he get this way often?" she asked.

For the first time, a look of true communication seemed to pass between the two women. "Only when he's been too long without City food," Wilma said. "Buck, don't you understand? I had difficulty being Outside, and I've been trained for extra-planetary service." She shrugged. "To expect others to come here willingly-- We'll send scientists out, of course, but I think we'll have to depend on Big Broe Alee here to station a guard and keep Beta-Five safe from Jayzee attacks."

Dr. Theophilus said, "I am sure we can arrive at an equitable agreement."

Big Broe Alee shrugged. "Come on then, we'll talk back at the Heights."

Several of the Broe canoes had returned and now bobbed outside Beta-Five's window. Wilma, Big Broe Alee, Cat-Killer, and Twiki clambered into them. Buck, the last to go, looked around. "Good-bye for now," he whispered to Beta-Five. She blinked at him, almost in response, and closed the window behind him.

They paddled back to the glowing fires that dotted the small islands clustering around the entrance to the Iron Road. Big Broe Alee's people were broiling fish over fires that flickered out of old stoves, refrigerators, even a car chassis or two.

Buck looked back over the rippling water. A full moon laid a silver sheen over the wide expanse. "One loony, and the world went blooey."

Wilma looked back at the drowned city. "It's up to us to see it doesn't happen again." She frowned thoughtfully. "Look, Buck, I found out one thing on this mission: I can live Outside if I have to. If I can do that--maybe there's still some hope for Earth!" She managed a smile.

"What the Hell, that's a start," Zelda said. "Wilma--you're right in some ways. There are still a lot of Wild Mutants out there. But--maybe--if we can make that start grow--"

Leaving the cousins to their reunion, Buck turned for one last look at New York's towers. "I just wonder," he said aloud, "what if he'd made it? What kind of Universe would there have been?"

Father and Son

I am your father;
I your love
son? I love you, even now
even I
now I understand you, my son

father,
it's
not
too

It is too late for me, my son

father

I cannot return now

can to

feel the

the good don't mourn for me

good side give alone

within with up now; it is my destiny; let me go

But you have given me new hope

I now

need

you have redeemed me; my son

father

I

forgive me

I love you

love

you were right

don't try to hold me here

leave

alone

now; it is my destiny; let me go

me

help

you already have

Liz Sharpe



THE PAWN

MICHELLE MALKIN

The Dark Lord lay dying.

Standing at the forefront of the loyal mob of servants, courtiers, and guards surrounding Darth Vader's bed, Luke Skywalker observed through cold, emotionless blue eyes the man he had for the past five years called father.

Skywalker had given up much for this paternity: friendship, love, the struggle to follow the path of Light. Once he had made his choice, he'd known there could have been no other way. Friendship and love had become meaningless abstractions. He had become a self-contained unit, heir to the limitless power of the Dark Side. This much he had gained.

Years had passed, years in which Skywalker had trained long and hard to be worthy of his position as the son of the Dark Lord. There had been much to make up for; much to set right. Willingly, he had learned his duties, fulfilling his lord's expectations. Never in all those years had he questioned or refused to carry out an order. Always had he felt the rightness of such commands.

But in recent months, as Vader's scarred and ravaged body had weakened beyond the healing power inherent in the Force, Skywalker had slowly become aware of a change within himself. He had felt the return of a curiosity and an urge for power that had mysteriously disappeared the moment he had accepted the Dark Lord's domination. His anger at realizing that Vader had tampered with his mind had only been tempered by his desire to learn the reason for such an action. The knowledge he had gained in his no-longer-blocked search through the Force had turned the heat of anger into the ice of hatred.

Now, at a signal from Vader, the young Jedi approached the bedside. Anything but total obedience to Vader's will was unthinkable, as Skywalker had learned in the years of his lord's strength. Now, he was the stronger, but he could afford to wait. His time was coming.

The strong, deep voice that issued from Vader's vocoder didn't fit the drained, wasted figure on the bed.

"You have served me well, Luke," the Sith Lord said, motioning for his guards to move forward, "and the time has come for your just reward." He stopped for a moment, as though collecting his thoughts, then continued. "If you have learned nothing else, you have learned to savor vengeance. I felt your exultation at consummating your revenge on the Princess and her pirate lover. I felt the shock and agony of their deaths. Even more than the corporeal death of Master Yoda and the final destruction of the Rebel Alliance, their deaths made you strong in the Dark Side."

Skywalker sensed that Vader's parchment lips stretched in a skeletal smile behind his light life-support mask, but his own smile revealed only the expected greed and impatience. He was aware of both the Dark Lord's frustration and his expectation of imminent triumph.

To the victor, revenge would be sweet.

"Revenge..." Vader said the word almost in a whisper. "I had hoped to save my own revenge for a time far in the future--revenge against the ones responsible for my own early death, revenge against the last shining star of a corrupt system." Claspings the young Jedi's arm to pull him closer, he rasped, "You will never be Dark Lord of the Sith, Luke Skywalker. You are not my son. Your father was Tan Skywalker--my brother!"

Skywalker pulled away easily, straightening to smile down on the steadily weakening man.

"I know, my lord uncle, I know." His smile slowly widened. "How you must have enjoyed the death of your true son--the son who neither knew you, nor suspected his own untapped Force abilities--your real threat. Corellians die hard, Uncle, but they do die."

Vader sank back into his pillow, his shock evident in his thready breathing. "How long have you known?" he asked.

"Long enough to protect myself." Skywalker waved an arm, indicating the guards surrounding him. "Your men are mine now, Uncle. It was a simple exercise in mental manipulation. As Obi-wan Kenobi once said,

'The Force can have a strong influence on the weak-minded.'

Sensing Vader's last weak attempt to draw strength through the Force, Skywalker waited several moments. He smiled. Then, hard-eyed, he siphoned off the Dark Lord's life-force.

"I could watch you die, Uncle," Skywalker commented, enjoying Vader's awareness of helplessness, "but you've taught me too well. I not only savor vengeance, I crave it--and I will have my revenge." He paused to allow the words to sink in. "Your dream of Galactic order dies with you, Lord Vader. I live only for power and destruction!"

Vader laughed, a wheezing, gasping sound that depleted his remaining strength. "You are a fool, Luke. Your presumptuousness will

destroy you, as it did your father."

"As yours has destroyed you!" Skywalker exclaimed as he drained Vader's body of the last of its energy.

Stepping back from Vader's lifeless husk, Skywalker felt the full uninhibited power of the Force as it surged through him.

"Presumptuousness, my lord uncle?" he asked triumphantly. "Then, answer me this from whatever hell you occupy as you watch me conquer my way to the Imperial throne--was I your pawn or were you mine?"

Epilogue:

The Emperor laughed. ✱



Lost Young Man

(In transit, Slave One:
Unconscious in carbonfreeze, Han Solo dreams of his search
in the wastelands of Hoth, and what he found.)

Luke? Hoth? Bespin? Leia? Luke? Hoth? Luke? Hoth?...

MY FRIEND'S OUT THERE

damn, it's cold and dark
all of a sudden
what the hell ever possessed me
to risk my neck for some
reckless kid
too dumb to come in
out of the cold and dark?
here I am
freezing
on behalf of some kid
who got lost
if I only knew where
he's been gone
a long time now
and I'm the only one
who's gonna find him, because
I'm the only one
who's still looking
who knows where to look
oh hell, I've been through
cold and dark before
and will again
I have a feeling
I lose track of the times and places
it's easy to do
here in the icy night
but this time is different
I had my reasons
for getting myself
into this damn awful mess
tight spot
cold and dark
that I'm in



SEE YOU IN HELL

thought I'd turned my back on
these wastelands
for good
Luke
don't do this to me
don't wander off and lose
yourself
like another kid I knew once
young and reckless
like you
he lost himself
in a harsh world
where
I never did find him again
can't honestly say I tried real hard
because times were tough
and being a callous survivor type
I was real busy
just staying alive
I guess I sort of left him behind
after a while
wandering around confused
it's been a long time
since I lost track of that other kid
kid it won't ever happen again

MAYBE YOU CALL THIS FRIENDSHIP

I've been searching
for a long time now
for you
kid
it's a dangerous business

exposed
out here
like this
only you
could've drawn me out
this way
into the path of
the wicked storm
that's coming on strong
though maybe I'm staying now
for reasons of my own
out here
I've got one of those feelings
we both get
sometimes
this time there's gonna be
serious trouble
and we're both stuck with it
I know
I've got one of those feelings
about you

TAKES ONE TO KNOW

it's crazy
I know
what I'm doing
what the hell
you'd better believe that
I'm going to tell you
in no uncertain terms
how I feel
about what I'm going through
because of you
as soon as we're back
safe
together
this is crazy
but I'm committed
now
in so many ways
I have to go on
into the cold and dark
for now
there's no turning back
so hang on
you have to
believe me
I know
you have to
be crazy
to get committed
like I am



POSITIVE THOUGHT

on the inside
where it matters
when it matters
when there ain't
nothing sensible left
you can do
don't be sensible
don't be afraid
because you can
do it
you have to
keep right on
fighting because
odds are
the odds are wrong
like all the times before
we'll make it back
together
if you don't do anything dumb
like give up
hope
the cold and dark
won't hold me back for long
because
on the inside
where it matters
I know
you're out there
keeping up
that resistance of yours
which can be so tough
I know
you can be tough
you have to
be tough
now
I'm on my way
crazy
Solo
as usual
who cares

NOW WHERE

maybe we're both lost now
I'm crazy to care
I'm crazy
I don't care
just don't give up on me
kid
damn the cold and the dark
keep fighting
don't leave me alone
this time

I'm not letting you go
 there's more to living than
 just staying alive
 I'd be crazier
 if I went back
 now
 just to stay alive
 alone
 I'll find you
 before it's too late
 I have to
 because
 if I can't go back
 with you
 I ain't interested in going back
 I'm gonna find you soon
 and then the cold and dark
 can just go whistle
 because together
 we can lick anything
 you and me, kid
 anything

ANOTHER TIME

was that me
 who said that
 there has to be another time
 must be another time
 I remember
 now
 when I was a younger--
 crazy kid--
 Luke
 you keep the fire burning
 because I'm freezing
 wondering where you are
 lost in the cold and darkness
 because of you
 because of some
 damned kid
 I've been looking for--
 seems like a lifetime now
 I've been wandering
 in the cold and dark
 searching

YOU HEAR ME

somehow
 we'll survive
 this time
 but this time
 only together
 kid
 hang on
 hope may be futile
 but it's all we've got
 and we've got to have something
 to go on
 and I'm going on
 somehow
 I hope
 I can
 hope
 you can
 at least
 just stay alive
 because
 I have to
 find you
 myself
 kid
 my self
 Luke
 I know you
 hear me
 somehow
 you have to
 hang on
 to go on
 don't give up
 hope
 you hear me
 where are you
 kid
 I'm on my way
 kid
 I'm searching
 for you
 Solo
 here in the cold and dark



Liz Sharpe



A New Hope: The Battle of the Death Star

(sung to "'39", by Queen)

In the year that hope renewed
They gathered up the volunteers;
In the days of the Empire's rule.
And the ships sailed out into the crisp and foggy morn;
The sweetest sight ever seen.

They went against Tarkin's Hell,
And the legends, they all tell;
Of the score brave souls that died.
And not one could resist one defiant, rebel's yell,
"Ne'er look back, never fear, never cry!"

(Chorus) Can't you hear the call, tho' the voice is far away;
Can't you hear it calling you?
Bury your dead in the sand, for today we join hands,
For the land that our grandfathers knew!

In that year of hope renewed,
Came three ships in from the blue;
The survivors came home that day.
A blond youth won a battle for a pow'r long thought dead;
Rebel hearts sang with joy that day!

For the Death Star was no more,
The boy will heed his master's lore;
To bring back sanity.
And an old man smiles again,
He found in the boy a friend;
"His father's eyes, from his eyes, cried to me!"

(Chorus) Can't you hear the call, tho' the voice is far away;
Can't you hear it calling you?
Bury your dead in the sand, for today we join hands,
For the land that our grandfathers knew!

Can't you hear the call, tho' the voice is far away;
Can't you hear it calling you?
Let the Force guide your hand and soon you will be a man--

For your life's still ahead...remember me.



Jenni

Deep the Gathering Gloom

Patricia Munson-Siter

Tahla scrutinized the newcomer nursing a drink at the bar. He was a rather plain man, with hair cut shorter than normal for Mos Eisley. His only distinguishing feature was his nose, which was a little large for his face. Underneath--that was a different story! As she focused her inner awareness on the man, the Imperial agent was struck by his seething emotions, which were dominated by a radiated bitterness. Tahla's green eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she withdrew, abandoning the attempt to read him telepathically. It would take someone with far greater skill than her own to penetrate his barriers.

Nevertheless, she could not afford to ignore anyone with shields like that. Gossip and speculation among her informants had centered on this stranger since his arrival on-planet earlier in the week. While performing her duties as an undercover agent on this backwater pesthole, she had learned to listen to the barroom gossips. Unfortunately, there was not much meat to the talk about the man.

I can't read him, and no one knows anything about him. I'll have to ask him directly!

The man was brooding over a nearly empty glass. Tahla motioned the barkeep, ordered another drink sent to the stranger.

The bartender set the drink in front of the man and jerked his head in her direction. The stranger turned to look at her, the frown which crossed his face emphasizing the lines at the corners of his eyes and between his brows. She raised her glass to him, as his analytical glance took in her black shipsuit, pilot's insignia, and unspoken air of authority. Tahla sensed the curiosity growing within him.

The barkeep said something and the man hesitated, then nodded almost imperceptibly. Getting up, he made his way to her table. He sat down, raised his glass to her, and took a swig.

"Welcome to Mos Eisley, stranger," she said, her voice deep and just a touch nasal. "Feel at home, relax. . .so far it's a quiet day."

"Did you buy my drink just to break the monotony?" he demanded. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I am Tahla. As to why. . .I'm employed as a mercenary captain by the locals, and I need trained men. You have an ex-military air. Would you be interested in employment, er--?"

"Fairworld. Bruce Fairworld. Mercenary? Against what, sandrats?" Disbelief colored his words.

"There's a race native to Tatooine known as the Tusken Raiders, or Sandpeople. They've been systematically raiding homesteads for the last few months. The homesteaders have neither the skill nor the experience to combat organized guerrilla warfare. One of their leaders contacted me through intermediaries and asked me to put together a resistance force capable of opposing the Sandpeople's raids."

He looked skeptical. "You came here without a company?"

"I work alone," she said flatly. "My specialty is training locals to organize and defend themselves, not getting engaged in battle myself." This had been her cover for several years now, and when

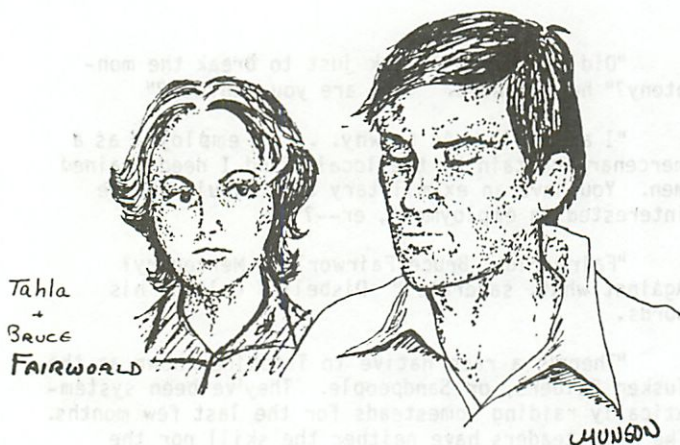


Imperial stormtroopers had unintentionally stirred up the Tusken while searching for Senator Organa's droids, they had opened up this world for Tahla's particular covert skills. "If I can hire others who have skills to impart and who can also train my charges, it makes my job that much easier. And, if nothing else, at least you can earn enough to pay your way off-planet."

He nodded. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life on this hell-hole," he agreed. "But my specialty is tactics, not fire and maneuver."

Tahla brightened. "All the better. Tactics has never been my strong point. I can definitely use you. If you're interested?"

He shrugged. "I guess so."



"Well, Bruce, here are the details." The discussion degenerated into terms and specifics of the homesteaders' problem. During it, Tahla was able to worm some information out of her new recruit, but it took all her skill to catch the hints and put them together.

He had once been a member of the elite Imperial Guard, an alumnus of the Navy's Military College. Although brilliant, he held views his peers considered impractical and heretical. They forced him to resign his commission. Since then he had held odd jobs on various free-traders and such. His ex-colleagues had seen to it that he could find no employment in Imperial service or connected fields. His last employer had dumped him in Mos Eisley without pay, taking off before Bruce could collect. So far, no one else had needed a crewman, and he was down to his last few credits.

"All right," she finished, "you'll be an asset to our group. I'll take you to the barracks. Have much?"

"No. Just a jumpbag."

"We'll pick it up on our way out."

Tahla's landspeeder was not the latest, but it was a sturdy vehicle which had a better engine than appearances indicated. Bruce paid off his room and threw his jumpbag into the back of the 'speeder, then pulled himself into the seat next to the mercenary captain.

Tahla showed her ID to the stormtroopers on traffic patrol at the outskirts of Mos Eisley. The trooper on duty waved them through without looking at the silver disk. Tahla had been in and out of town so frequently, he recognized her on sight.

Once out of town, Tahla gunned the motor. The landspeeder buzzed quietly across the desert.

"Must be quite a way out," Bruce shouted over the wind.

"We're using an abandoned homestead for our headquarters," Tahla shouted back. "Should take another hour to get there."

As the more civilized, cultivated lands slid behind them, Tahla's easy confidence was replaced by an air of aware alertness. She instructed Bruce to pull out a pair of power binoculars from under his seat, and had him scan the countryside ahead and to the sides.

"Awfully cautious, aren't you?"

"Tatooine has many dangers other than Tusken Raiders, Fairworld. The unwary end up very, very dead. This is an unforgiving world."

He glanced over. "What can I expect?"

Keeping all senses alert, she paused before answering him. "Sandpeople. Sandsnakes. I saw one sixty-meter skeleton not far from HQ. Jawas are usually timid and cowardly, but they sometimes take advantage of unwary travelers. Then there are also Krayt dragons, which are large enough to cause serious damage." She smiled ironically. "And that's just a small sample of the wildlife."

Bruce paid more attention to his visual scouting.

The homestead occupied by the mercenaries was large, with more than enough barracks space for the base's occupants. Tahla let Bruce choose his bed space, then dragged him into the living room which the mercenary band had converted into a communications center.

The room was manned by four people. Three wore the rough clothing of the colonists, the fourth wore faded Alderaanian dress. All wore blasters.

"This is Bruce Fairworld, our new tactician," Tahla said. "Bruce, this is Evan Lars, the leader of the homesteading combine who hired us. He lost his brother in one of the first raids. Also Duran Camlin and Kaolo Starpoli--they run moisture farms to the east and have suffered heavy losses. And one

of my mercenaries, Lott Barrett. He saw guerrilla action on Kogen three years ago."

The Alderaani was the only one who stood out. His dark hair and deep-space tan were a marked contrast to the sun-bleached hair and freckles of the colonists. Lott's stance was easy, his eyes remote, his face the expressionless mask of the trained killer.

"I see our sensor map is nearly finished," Tahla said, eyeing a large map-screen. "When will it be operational, Evan?"

"Three hours, Captain." The colonist eyed the delicate sensing device with misgivings. "Are you sure we'll be able to locate the bastards with this?"

"The Imperials claim they can pick up the Sandpeople by the heat they generate. Sandstorms and magnetic fluctuations in the atmosphere can mess up the readings and scramble the signals, of course."

"So long as we've a general grasp of their location we should be all right. The Tusken Raiders aren't yet sophisticated enough to shield themselves from infrared scanners," Lott murmured.

"Praise the All-Highest for small favors," Tahla returned.

Luke Skywalker knew of the increased threat of the Sandpeople, but would not change his plan to return to Ben Kenobi's hut. There had been a time when he was glad to leave Tatooine, had sworn never to return to the dust-ball planet. But after the destruction of the *Death Star*, he had come to realize he had to return home, had to gather what remnants there were to mark the passing of a very special old man.

Han Solo, flying the *Starburst*, the ship the rebels had given him because his beloved *Falcon* was now too well known, dropped off the young rebel. Solo promised to return for him once he finished paying off some important debts.

When Luke arrived at Anchorhead, his old 'buddies' were extremely surprised to see him, and wanted to know how he had survived the destruction of the Lars moisture farm. When Luke learned that the Tusken had been blamed for the incident, his initial impulse was to broadcast the truth. He'd kept his mouth shut long enough to realize that the Empire had unintentionally given him a defense-in-depth that would be well worth maintaining. He had been properly surprised and upset, telling his ex-peers that he'd shipped out on a free trader months ago and had only just returned home.

Evan Lars was happy to see him, and offered him a place in the small resistance force he was building up around an off-planet mercenary core. Luke diplomatically explained that he had a job, a duty he couldn't forget. Evan was more understanding than Uncle Owen had ever been.

Meanwhile, there were other things to do.

There was something so distant, so remote about the local squabbles he heard in Mos Eisley and Anchorhead that he suddenly realized how much he had changed in just a few short weeks. He had been through an unusual baptism of Imperial politics, and single-planet matters seemed unimportant in comparison.

Driving those thoughts from his mind, Luke promised to return and talk to everyone before lifting planet; he then rented a family-sized landspeeder at an outrageous price and headed out into the desert.

The trip out was uneventful. Ben's hut was as lonely and desolate as he remembered. The door swung open at his touch. Even in the few weeks since they'd left, enough sand had sifted inside to coat everything with a layer of grit.

Luke went slowly through the contents of the hut. Some things, like Ben's trunks, he threw in the back of the landspeeder as they were. Other things he sorted through carefully, Luke separating what he felt would be useful from that which was inconsequential.

More than a week had passed before he finished sifting through the potpourri of possessions. He checked the load in the back of the landspeeder to make sure everything was tied down, then started the motor and headed back in the direction of Mos Eisley.

"Well, at least I know Luke is all right," Evan Lars said at the improvised mercenary HQ. Tahla nodded absently; she'd heard enough to know Evan's nephew had survived the Tusken attack on Owen Lars' residence because he'd signed on a free trader sometime earlier. She was more interested in Bruce Fairworld's presence beside her.

It had been an interesting two weeks since Bruce had joined the mercenary force. Her inquiry to Imperial records had confirmed Fairworld's story; he had indeed been one of the Imperial Guard. His disagreements with his superiors had ended his position, but the files said he had a genius-level mind, especially where military matters were concerned. He was a brilliant tactician, but once burned, Fairworld had developed an antipathy for the Imperial government. Even so, Tahla was sure she could recruit him into the Black Jedi if he proved himself in this battle. Surely someone with so strong a Force aura would not forego the chance for training just for...freedom? Besides, there was a certain attraction between them... Tahla, recognizing it, had first used that warmth to tie him to her; as the days had gone by she discovered that her own emotions were also becoming involved. It was a new feeling; she wasn't quite sure how to handle it.

"Look at this," Bruce suddenly spoke up, nodding toward the map. The magnetic storm that had been obscuring the sensor field was dying out. Tahla saw the telltale formation appearing.

"That's our cue," she said. "The Tusken are on the move. Let's get out and survey the terrain

before deploying our forces, Fairworld. Lott, we'll keep in touch with you."

"We'll be ready," the Alderaani replied.

Tahla and Bruce watched the sensor screen with interest. "That's it, then. They're heading toward the western homesteads."

"Excellent." Tahla leaned across Fairworld, picked up the comm unit microphone. She switched it on, checked the sensor screen once more. She was prepared when the Alderaani lieutenant answered. "Lott, activate the Alert Force, and the homesteads involved. Tell Marn to stay at HQ and keep an eye on the sensors. He'll function as coordinator."

"Right." Lott did not waste words.

Tahla and Fairworld turned their attention back to the sensor screen. The mercenaries and colonists moved out with the efficiency of a highly trained force, but Bruce withheld his final judgment until he could see them in actual combat.

The home-defense force used Skyhoppers to arrive at their appointed front; as observers, Tahla and Bruce used the slightly slower but more maneuver skimmer. Bruce had the power binoculars again; he would act as spotter for the mortars and help Tahla keep an eye on the battle in general. Tahla could also keep an eye on him.

Under Bruce's direction, the first mortar rounds landed slightly in front of the first ranks of Bantha-mounted Sandpeople. As they started to scatter, he ordered the next round in their midst. At the same time Tahla directed the homesteaders' second alert force, already dug in a crescent facing the Tusken advance, to pick off any stray native that came within range. The mortar rounds would not stop the Sandpeople, only slow them down.

Several posts along the central left flank reported skirmishes. Communication from the posts indicated that the Sandpeople were still shaken up and confused by the unexpected mortar attack. The exploding shells had forced the raiders to split up and attack individually rather than in any type of formation, making it easier for the homestead sharpshooters to pick off the enemy.

"Right flank is having problems," Bruce announced unemotionally, showing the schooled detachment of the trained tactician. "Have units 5 and 6 close up to the front to support 12 and 13."

Luke's landspeeder skipped violently as he pulled back the power. Tusken had exploded around him. Without thinking, his hands jerked the wheel southward. Suddenly faces he recognized popped out--scared, dirty--and armed.

"What the hell are you doing?" Luke screamed as he saw several homesteaders backing up. "You're better armed than the Tusken. Merrill, I recognize

you! You fought the Sandpeople two years ago. Let's get going."

By harassment and verbal abuse Luke got the homesteaders back in position. Looking at the map the squad leader had, Luke recognized the excellent planning and placement illustrated. He called in their position to the leader of the expeditionary forces as the men rallied around against the raiders.

"We're getting some support from the homesteaders now," Tahla said after calling up the two reserve units Bruce had requested. "Where should I direct them?"

"Our next weakest spot is the center. Have them report there."

"Done."

Within minutes of the deployment of the reserve troops, the posts began to report a lessening of the fighting. Marn called and reported the sensors showing a Tusken retreat. Nodding thoughtfully, Tahla contacted Evan Lars.

"Evan, I suggest you try to send out your ambassadors again," she told him, glad that at least Tusken custom would not allow interference with representatives. "After a loss like that, they may be more willing to listen to your offers." Breaking contact with Evan Lars, Tahla turned to Bruce. He was on the auxiliary comm unit. He looked up at her.

"Tahla, we've got a request for help down there. One of the homesteaders--Nornin says he's the one who rallied the right flank to our support--his landspeeder was damaged."

The homesteader was a young man, his blond hair wind-blown. The front end of the large 'speeder he was leaning over had a chunk blown out of it, but the rest of the vehicle was unharmed.

His eyes gained hope as he saw the skimmer. "I need transportation to Mos Eisley," he told them. "My ship dropped me off here two weeks ago to pick up this stuff." He indicated the back end of the speeder. "It should be back by now."

"Shouldn't be any problem. Bruce, Dorn, Mathews, assist the young man with his gear, will you?"

"So you got off-planet after all, eh, Luke?" Dorn was saying as Tahla went over to her lieutenant to check on their wounded. Tahla wondered if the youngster was Evan's nephew.

Bruce and Luke seemed on the way to becoming friends by the time she got back, thanks to their discussion of the battle and tactics used. "That was some battle you fought, Captain!" Luke said.

"Thanks. Bruce's knowledge of tactics helped quite a bit."

"Sure sounds like it. I know some people who could use that knowledge."

"I've got him now," Tahla said quietly. "But if Bruce wants to leave, I can't stop him."

"We'll see," Luke said. "Think the Tuskena will be back?" Tahla sensed doubt--and something deeper--from the young man. It made her uneasy--and in her position she couldn't afford to be uneasy. She regarded him thoughtfully.

"So far Evan's reps report some success. We'll know for sure in a day or two," Tahla said. "I hope they can convince the Tuskena to stay in their own territory. Whatever happens, the homesteader Alert Force will keep ready."

"Not the mercenaries?"

"This battle proved the homesteaders can hold their own. Evan Lars wants us to stay on another month or so, then we'll be paid off." Tahla had also received orders to move on from her superiors earlier in the day. She turned to Bruce Fairworld. "I'd like you to stay on with me, if you can, Bruce. Your tactical knowledge was certainly proved during the battle."

Bruce shook his head. "It's tempting, Tahla, but Luke's already offered me a berth with him when he leaves. That's... more interesting. I like traveling too much, and I enjoy free trader work," he said.

"Keep me in mind, then." Tahla was frustrated. She also sensed a finger of fear, covered with relief. What did he fear? Her? Their involvement? Damn it, the man was well worth training as a Black Jedi. She glanced at Luke again, and frowned. The young colonial also had the air of the Force about him... and there was something very curious about that aura, almost as if it were doubled, as if there were two people inhabiting the body instead of one. When she looked again, that fuzziness was gone. Curiosity even more aroused, Tahla determined to look into this if she could do so, yet avoid blowing her primary mission.

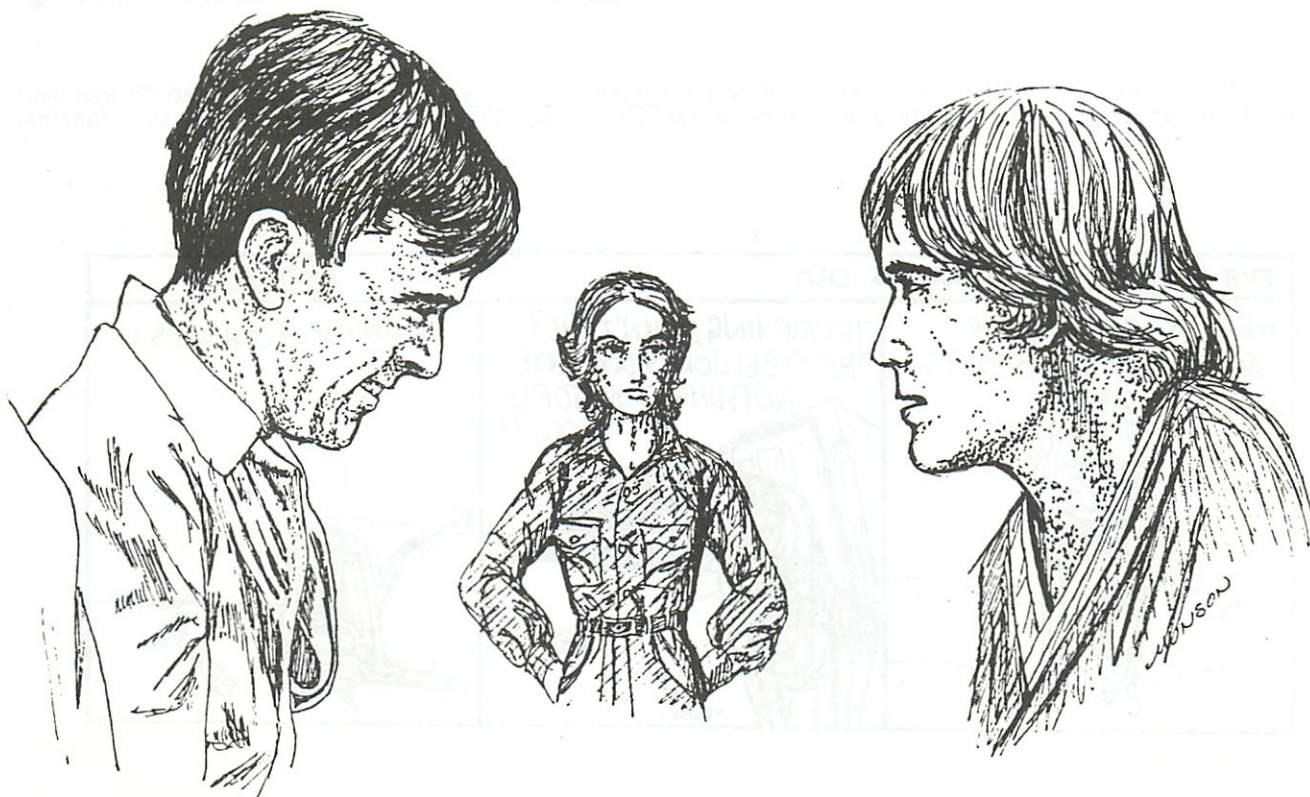
"Come on," she said, "let's move out." Bruce and Luke clambered aboard the skimmer. Pensively, she climbed in after.

At Mos Eisley they stopped at the Port Master's office while Luke went in. A minute later he popped out again, grinning. "He's here. Dock 15."

"Let's go, then," Bruce said.

The dock was as primitive as any other in Mos Eisley. The ship would never call attention to itself. Luke's and Bruce's gear was quickly loaded on board the ship, the **Starburst**. Luke addressed her captain as "Han." Han, a Corellian, had an insouciant air that Tahla had marked in others. He was a smuggler.

"Actually made this run pay for itself, Luke! Picked up two passengers on the rim and dropped them off on Garva IV. One of 'em was a frail; not bad



lookin', either, though she was as stubborn as . . . well, I think the computer has a holo of them."*

Han bent over the computer, called up a picture of his recent passengers. Tahla stiffened. Her involuntary movement was covered by Bruce's gasp. "Damn! You know who those two are?" he demanded.

"She called herself Captain Jindra Marlys and the other was Malen," Han replied easily. "You know them?"

"Hell, yes! Look, I was in the Imperial Guard before I was cashiered. Well, the man is Commander Malen, one of Vader's chief aides. The woman is Jindra Marlys, all right. But she's one of Vader's best wingmen, and one of his Black Jedi! We used to call her 'Vader's handmaiden of death' when I was in the Guard."

"Imperial spies!" Han swore viciously. The vehement reaction told Tahla that he must have reason to fear the Empire other than smuggling.

But local gossip mentioned only one 'Han' who would so fear Imperials: Han Solo, once captain of the Millennium Falcon, and a suspected rebel. Her thoughts ran to the natural conclusion. That would make Luke, Luke Skywalker, rather than Luke Lars-- the one who had found Senator Organa's robots and had gone to old man Kenobi with them. . .

Tahla hesitated, torn between her duty to her Lord and to her own safety. Quickly, her trained warrior's eye measured the three men in front of her; three to one were odds this Black Jedi did not care to call down upon herself. She'd keep her peace until she got off board and could warn the

nearby stormtroopers.

"Hope Leia can get us another ship, fast," Solo was saying. "We're going to have to abandon the Starburst. I'm sure Marlys suspects us of being rebels, and she'll spread our description around the Empire, sure as Hell's a mantrap."

"Let's get going now, then," Bruce said. "Sure you won't come along, Tahla?"

She shook her head. "I'm needed here," she said. "Mercenaries can't afford to break contract."

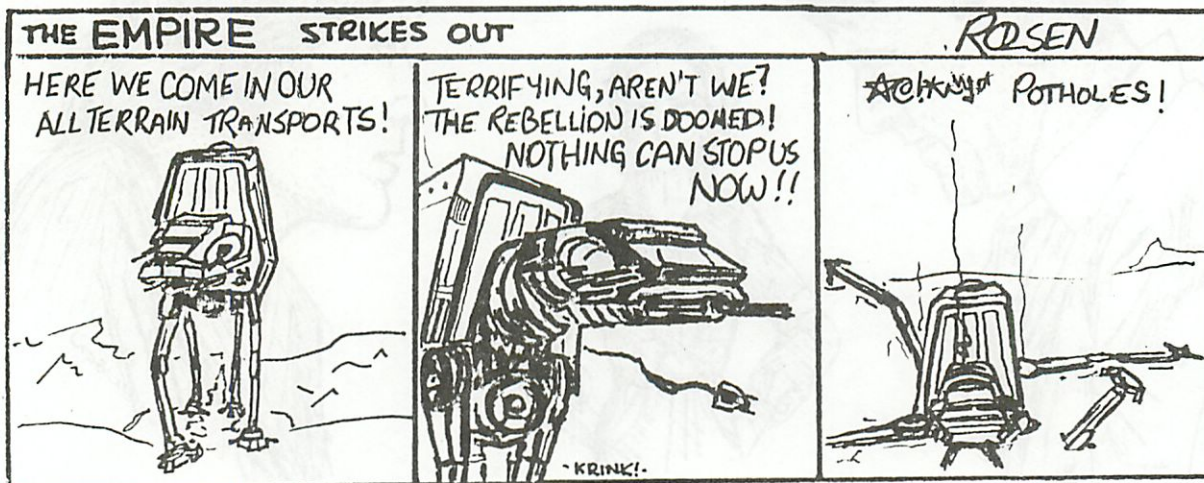
"Maybe we'll meet again," Bruce said, but there was a hint of relief on his face mirroring that in his mind. So he had felt the growing bond between them, and was even more afraid of it than she had been.

"Yeah." Tahla was ushered unceremoniously off-ship. Before she could even get completely out the door of the docking bay, there was a roar, and the freighter lifted skyward.

No way to catch them now, even if I go directly to the Port Master, she thought. And if I report this, Bruce'll be listed as a known rebel. She could not endure the thought of his being hunted; she had grown too close to the ex-Guardsman for comfort. And Lord Vader does not tolerate mistakes. Perhaps it would be best to keep quiet and doctor this episode into something innocuous in my report. Yes, that's what I'll do.

On her way back to the mercenary headquarters, the Black Jedi, one of Vader's personal agents, wondered how often friends and lovers had been on opposite sides of this wretched conflict. . . *

*NOTE: This story is told in Sharon Emily's Showcase Presents: Star Wars in a story entitled "Promotion." In addition, an article on the role and history of the Sith in my "Black Jedi universe" is in this fanzine.



Second Thoughts

You've changed.

Gods, what a stupid, inadequate, petty thing to say!
Untrue, too.

For what you are now was always within you,
but I was too blind, too wrapped up
in rebellions and Corellians to look beyond
my pat ideas of Tatooinian farmboys in sandy
clothes.

Served me right, perhaps, if you had joined that
Dark Lord

who has taken from me everything.

Everything, indeed, now,
except my rebel symbol, my token Jedi.

Where did you find it, Luke, that unexpected
strength

to say him nay

when he offered you everything?

I see it now shadowed in your eyes:

the look of a man who has been offered the universe
and has turned it away.

Could I have done it, I wonder, been so strong?

But in a way, he (should I say your father?) has
succeeded

in taking you from my influence, my sphere,
for I can see that you are far beyond me now,
caught up in some spell which I can only dimly
comprehend,

and have turned your back on me.

I can't blame you, but it hurts.

My friend Luke

--the time when we could be more long past--

so now I say, my friend, forgive me,

Forgive me for not taking the time to know you,

for, all naively, trifling with you while I made up
my vacillating Alderaani mind.

It's made up now, you know.

How could I have ever thought

--or you, my friend--

that we could have been one, in mind and spirit,
when we're so distant, in so many ways.

Now the Corellian, I know him;

we think alike, were brought up in a similar, hard
school,

if admittedly on different sides of the fence.

We allow of no Forces, good or bad

to run our lives (or so we believe),

but depend on hard logic, of blasters or troops

to free us of bounty hunters and Empires.

The Corellian doesn't have your sweet temper,
nor your wise way of calmly accepting my faults;
he snaps at me, caustically pointing my frailties
out.

I need that. So does he.

Patience does nothing to change

two such hard-headed souls as we two.

The only way to do that is to knock our heads
together,

and maybe rattle a few brains into place.

Now I've angered you, hurt you, all in the same
breath,

though you don't show it, except to one who can now
see.

You only gaze at me silently, muscles turned to
stone,

so that another would think you thoughtfully
considering my words.

I know, though, with my new senses, given by my
sorrow,

that you want to shake me, make me feel your pain,
caused by my again-careless words.

I never say the right thing with you.

And you're weary of being understanding, patient,
and sweet,

and long to demonstrate the man, that blinded, I've
never seen.

But because of all the things that were done and
said

between you and me and he who is not here
we are deadlocked now and dusty in our mouths

are all the never-were's

and never-will-be's.

Is there anything left to say?

Perhaps there are too many mistakes, too much hurt
pride and misunderstanding

between us to retrieve aught now.

But, Luke, if now late, almost too late, and
tentatively,

I extend my hand to the real you, my eyes now clear
of sand,

will you see me clearly, too?

And knowing me,

will you take this stubborn, blind Alderaani's hand
and be my friend?

Pat Nussman

Changes

I used to be the one to whom
others came for strength;
I liked the feel of power
and I was good at it.
But that's gone now--
it just doesn't matter anymore...
I've learned that.

I used to be the Princess,
the Senator, the lady;
I knew a good family,
I knew my place--and liked it.
But Alderaan is gone,
and the Senate, and even who I was...
I've lost that.

I used to love a scoundrel
who dared to challenge me;
I learned to temper my mission
with his individuality.
But now my rogue has learned to say
"I'm sorry" and "I care"...
I've needed that.

I used to know who I was
what I was, what I felt;
I decided--and the Force decided--
that what I was should change.
And now I am a woman, a lover
a wanderer with him in the stars...
I've found that
I like it.



Now I know the freedom
in strength that's shared, not used;
I like commanding my own life
over the duty of commanding others.
What was, was necessary then
for me and for them...
That's over.

Now I can be whatever
I want to make of myself;
I have a brother to love
and a heritage in the Force.
What became of my childhood
was another's doing
That's gone now.

Now I see that no one
is all good, or bad, or selfish;
I wish it hadn't cost
such pain to learn to trust.
Commitment comes from love,
not the other way around...
That's clear now.

Now I don't care who I--
or anyone--used to be;
I can be true to myself
and still serve honorably.
The time has come for me--
and the galaxy--to move on...
That's the way of things
and I like it.

Fern Marder

Father

Father,
Father,
I need to know
Why you want me,
After so long,
To be yours.

So long,
I prayed
So long,
I begged to know
Who had made me,
Whom I followed,
In the Force.

Now
I know
Why
I falter--
In the light
I see the shadows,
In the dark
I see the stars,
If I
Am yours
Then you're mine?



Father,
Father,
How can you be
All my hatred,
All my evil,
All my greed?

Am I
Your light;
Did you
Entrust to me
All your honor,
All your freedom,
All your need?

If
We were
One
In spirit,
Would you teach me
All your power,
Would you show me
All your strength?
And could I,
In turn,
Show you mine?

Fern Marder

Spoken

Hey, kid,
I'm sorry about all this.
I never meant to hurt you.
Hell, I know what love is.
You didn't,
and then you learned,
and then...this.
I wish there was something I could do
to sort this out for you.

First love is the worst kind.
It burns so strong,
so beautiful,
and you think it's gonna last forever.
But it can't,
unless you're real lucky.
And this never even had a fair chance.

Luke, I'm sorry.
I loved her...
I love her...
I love you, too.
I never had a friend,
not a real brother-friend,
'cept Chewie.
And then there you were
sticking your neck out for me.
All of you--
but 'specially you,
'cause I really would have
understood if,
well,
if you hadn't.
But there you were.

I wanted to do something,
to give you something,
to repay your...
love.
And I knew that
the only thing,
the best thing
I could give to you two
was each other--
in love.



Softly



Aw, Luke,
I couldn't even do that right.
We never had a chance,
the three of us.
They stacked the deck against us
and then kept right on dealing.

I keep trying to imagine
how you feel,
loving her as you did
and now having to, well,
learn to love a different way.
I try to imagine--
and it hurts.
So I know it hurts you, too.

Can't help wishing
I had a sister
to share with you.
But the only other lady
in my life
is the Falcon.
And somehow
I don't think
she'd do the trick.

Hey, kid,
stay with us
if you can--
if you can stand it.
She needs you close now.
She's gotta learn to love
differently, too.
And I need you close
'cause otherwise
I'd always be afraid
I'd lost my friend.
And I couldn't stand that.

Besides,
(grin)
I still owe you one.

Fern Marder



Prince in Waiting

Pat Nussman

There were, she was sure, more disconcerting sights than that of a six-foot Corellian sitting on the edge of one's desk, but at that moment Pat Nussman couldn't call one to mind.

She glanced around surreptitiously. She was sure that at any moment, Phyllis would come up to demand what that was doing on her desk. Han Solo didn't fit into the corporate decor.

"What's that you're writing, Your Author-ness?" he inquired. "Doesn't look like insurance brochures to me."

Pat glared at him in her best imitation-of-Leia-Organa style. It had about as much effect on him as Leia's cold stares usually had--none at all. But it was a valiant attempt. "I'm a manager now. I don't do brochures," she said. "And besides, what do you know about insurance, smuggler?"

"Not much," he admitted. "But I'm almost sure Monumental doesn't cover gaderffii stick wounds received on the Jundland Wastes. And that--" He ripped the sheet off her pad and examined it closely. "---seems to be what you're writing about."

She snatched the sheet back, thrusting it among the other papers in her briefcase. "What's it to you, Solo?"

He held up his hand placatingly. "Hey, nothin', sweetheart. In fact I'm glad you're writing a story about rescuing me--about time, I'd say. It's just that I was talking to Anne Elizabeth the other day and she gave me a few ideas."

"Anne Elizabeth has lots of ideas, flyboy," Pat said dangerously. "And not all of them are wholesome for you. I seem to recall something called 'Honor Binds Me'..."

Han ran a finger around the inside of his collar. "Yeah, well, everyone has their off days."

"And then there was 'Life-Line,'" Pat continued inexorably. "And 'Revenant' and..."

"Well, but I like this one," he interrupted. "You see, she says that I'm the long lost Prince of the Sith..."

"No way." Pat tried to get up and walk away. She was already part of lower management, and would never get any higher in the ranks if anyone saw her arguing with some weirdo wearing tall black boots and a blaster.

He caught her arm and thrust her back into the swivel chair. "Hey, Your Writershipness, it's a great idea. I'd make a swell prince." He struck a noble pose. "Now, don't I look royal?"

"No," she said baldly.

Han looked hurt.

"You look like a scruffy nerfherder, a Georgia red-neck trucker, and a no-account petty smuggler," Pat said in a firm tone. She had an after-thought. "And the Princess thinks so, too."

"Well, that's not too surprising, is it now, Your Lady of the Rebelliousness?" He thrust his scowling face near hers.

"I don't know what you mean," she replied nervously.

"Don't play innocent with me," he snarled. "Ever since you started writing that blasted series, Leia starts spouting whatever you want her to say. And it usually ain't too nice from my point of view. Then lately this Kayka starts hanging around--every time I turn around, I trip over one of them. Will you kindly stop populating my universe with your characters?"

Pat shrugged, carefully avoiding Han's eyes. "Hey, flyboy, it's not my fault."

Han didn't reply. She sneaked a look at him; he looked far from placated. "It's a tough galaxy?" she asked tentatively.

"I hear that enough from Kayka Rieekan," he said coldly. "I don't need it from you."

She shrugged again. "Same difference."

"There's just one thing you can do to make up for it, Amnssu--" He stopped, shook his head disgustedly. "Now you have me doing it--I mean, Nussman. Make me the Prince of the Sith and I'll forget the whole thing."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Impossible. Go see Anne if you want it written." She smiled unpleasantly. "But be prepared to wait--I hear some guy named Batty has precedence over you."

He unfolded himself from the edge of her desk. "I want it in your story, Nussman, and I warn you, what I want, I get." He smirked. "Ask Leia if you don't believe me." He

swaggered out the door, one hand set lightly on his blaster. Pat watched him go, shaking her head.

Phyllis came out of her office. "Hey, who was that guy you were talking to? He's rather good-looking."

"Him?" Pat said absently. "Oh, he's the long lost Prince of the Sith." *

Editor's Note: Don't blame Pat for this; I stole it from her!

Moving On

In from the outer rim
I'm heading on to meet tomorrow
Yesterdays are only to forget
Don't know what I'll find
I'm hopin' joy instead of sorrow
Loneliness is all I'll probably get.

Don't need a force field
To guide my footsteps
Don't want a pattern
To rule my life
I want today
To have my friend beside me
I need my blaster
To save us both from strife.



Out beyond the stars
The night can freeze you forever
And all your dreams will never keep you warm
So I'm aheadin' sunward
Where the galaxy lies burnin'
Dreams can grow to life there in the core. (Chorus)

Stop the world from turnin'
And I just might stay till mornin'
A thousand years the hunter has to roam
But come and fly the stars with me
And reach out for tomorrow
Sometimes in my dreams I'm headin' home. (Chorus)

Music and lyrics by Jean L. Stevenson

LEGACY

BONNIE REITZ

War Commander Kirk's mouth set in a tight line as he read the private message from the Empress. The investigation should have been given to a scout ship, not to an Imperial Cruiser like the *Enterprise*. That the order came from Dhawan herself meant she considered weapon strength necessary. She could not have chosen a worse moment; after the battle with the Vegan ship, the United Imperial Cruiser *Enterprise* had received only temporary repairs on Vulcan. They were short-handed and the crew was battle-weary. But Kirk could not deny a direct Imperial Order.

He reached out for the com button. "This is Kirk. Uhura and Spock--to my cabin."

Chief of Security Uhura was in the middle of giving Lt. Kyle a series of simulated war-game attacks. He was sweat-covered as the computer holo switched off. She spoke into the com that transmitted her voice to the glassed-in training room below her. "You were killed by a phaser beam to the head in the second quarter, Mr. Kyle. You let an enemy get behind you--a very poor performance."

When she caught sight of Spock, Uhura rose from the control chair. "We'll discuss this fully when I return," she told Kyle, ignoring his grimace. "T'liss, take over for me."

The Cait slid into Uhura's vacated seat, and began the next series of simu-attacks. Uhura waited till T'liss was well into the game, then joined Spock to answer the Commander's summons.

They entered the security lift that would bring them directly to Kirk's quarters. The doors closed and Uhura let her displeasure show. "You've not reported for your tests, Mr. Spock."

"A Vulcan does not need such training; self-defense is taught as part of personal discipline."

"Personal discipline is not battle experience."

Spock turned his bearded face and glared at her. "I am not accustomed--"

At the same time, she pointed an angry finger at him. "Listen, Spock--"

The security lift door opened at Kirk's hand. He smiled, amused, at Spock's and Uhura's usual position--squared off like two fighting cocks. "Ah, my two amiable officers. What is it this time?"

They faced him mulishly. "This pointy-eared..."

"Uhura!" Kirk warned.

"...refuses to believe he needs simu-training."

"I do not need such a device. I am perfectly capable of reacting in a situation without the need for constant, artificial--"

Kirk cut him off. "Very well, Spock. I'll concede a Vulcan is different. However, report for those tests and show me what score you make first."

Spock's eyes flashed, but he swiftly quelled the emotion. Uhura grinned openly.

"Wipe that grin off, Lieutenant," Kirk snapped and she instantly went blank-faced, eyes forward at attention.

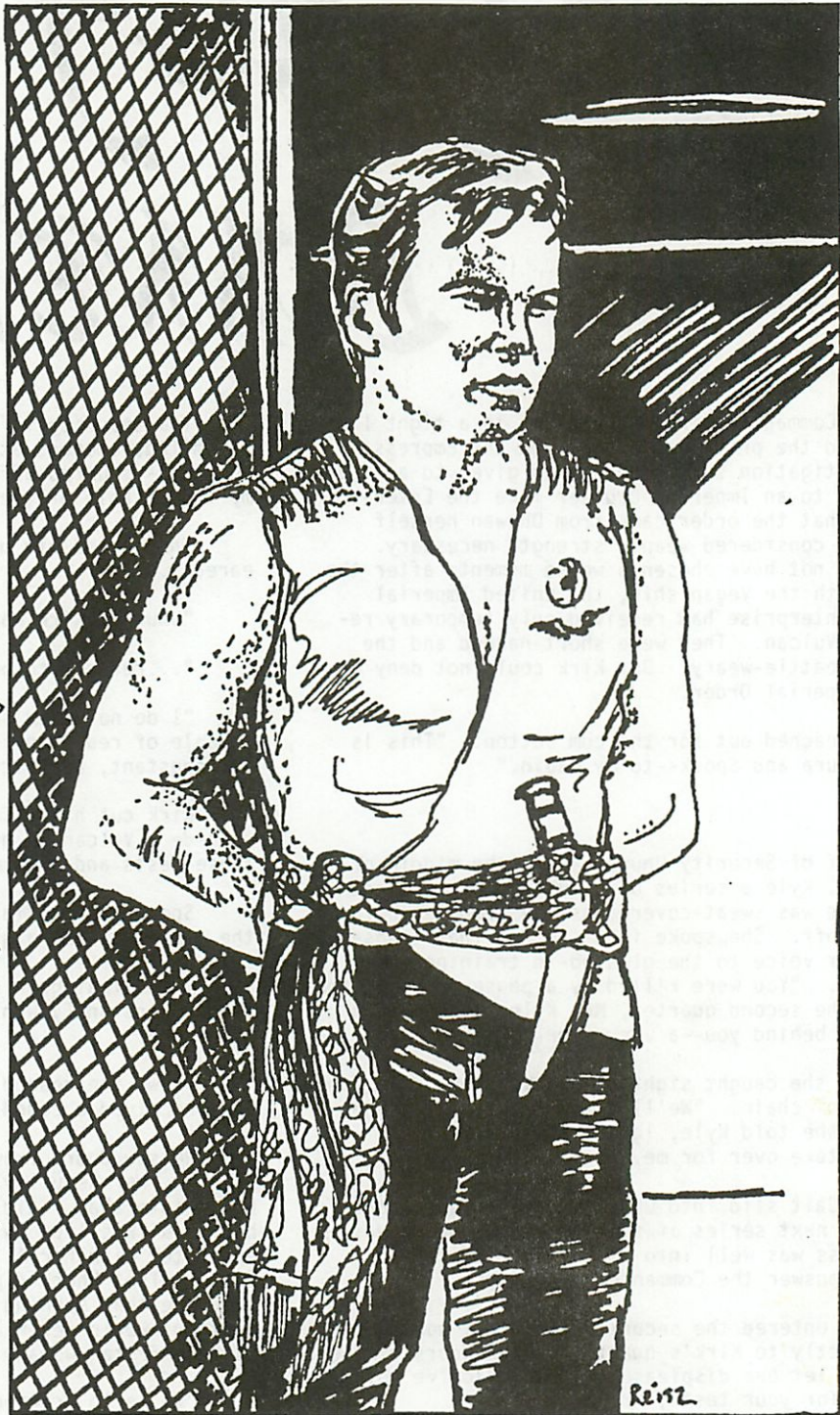
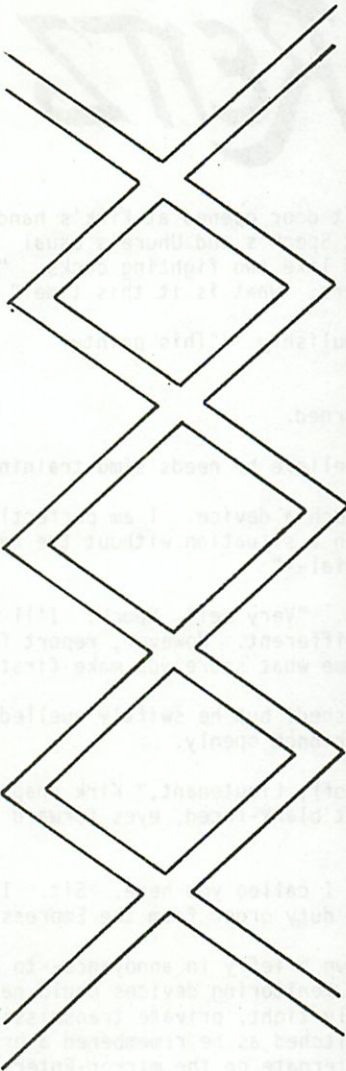
"Now, the reason I called you here. Sit. I've just received a coded duty order from the Empress."

He saw Uhura frown briefly in annoyance--to her chagrin, her security monitoring devices could never break into that rigidly tight, private transmission beam. Kirk's lips twitched as he remembered a brief encounter with her Alternate on the mirror-*Enterprise*. That Uhura's position, which required nothing more than opening hailing frequencies for her captain, would never have appeased this falcon-fierce African woman.

"We're to proceed to the coordinates last recorded by the Klingon vessel, Y'garu M'taj, and learn the truth of its disappearance."

"The Y'garu M'taj vanished almost six months ago," Spock said. "It was assumed to have been destroyed by Vegans. Why does the Empress send a fully armed cruiser after all this time?"

"Only a few days ago, a scout vessel found the Y'garu's emergency recording buoy. On it, the captain stated they were investigating a planet with a



pre-industrial civilization. Some of his crew had already gone down to the surface. His last entry is that a beam of unknown power struck his unshielded ship. He shot off an EB and the recording ends there. The scout could find no wreckage of the ship, nor any evidence of a planet close enough to be the one Khadja spoke of."

Uhura frowned. "A beam that can destroy a battle cruiser, without a trace?"

Kirk's brows raised. "You see why the Empress sends us? The Enterprise is the heaviest-weaponed vessel in the fleet. However, our run-in with the Vegan has seriously depleted us, both in ship's strength and crew."

"The journey there should afford some rest." Spock tilted his head to one side, thoughtfully. "I do not understand why the scout ship failed to locate the planet the Klingon Captain reported."

"Maybe it sprouted wings and flew," Uhura said mockingly.

Kirk's eyes sharpened.

"Captain's Log: The crew's irritability and tiredness has manifested itself in numerous eruptions of temper. I have had to personally interfere with four arguments over trivial matters that would not have broken out at another time. To relieve pressure, I am running the Enterprise with a skeleton crew, alternating duties as much as possible. Only the Engineering crew is working full time, to make repairs."

The com broke into his log entry. "Commander-- Security. Knife fight on Deck 4."

"Challenge?"

"No, sir. They have honor blades out."

"Then keep outsiders from that area. Forbid any bets on the winner. Who is it?"

"Sanders and Talmari."

Kirk's brows rose. Sanders he could understand. The man had a hair-trigger temper and the skill to break it up. But Talmari was a High Warrior Klingon--he would consider such a duel beneath him. Honor blades? They were drawn only in anger, for unpardonable insult, and they were always fought to the death. He cursed openly. "Inform me of the outcome. Kirk out." By law, he couldn't interfere with that kind of duel. Damn Sanders for starting one when they were so short-handed. Especially with Talmari--Kirk couldn't afford to lose him.

When the victor reported to him, Kirk was not too surprised. For all his strength, Sanders had not been a match for the swiftness and in-fighting skill of the Klingon. Now Talmari stood stiffly in the Commander's cabin, trying to conceal the leg wound McCoy had already reported to Kirk.

"What was it about, Talmari?"

"A matter of honor, Commander."

"Yours?"

"No. The captain of the Y'garu M'taj."

Kirk sat back and studied Talmari speculatively. The fact that he sat at all in the presence of a subordinate who could easily assassinate him had the calculated effect. But he was not a fool; he always kept one foot beneath him, flat on the floor. "Why? Khadja was not related to you."

"He was a Klingon. The terronich, Sanders, stated a human would not have lost his ship. Or falsified information."

"You don't think he did?"

"No."

"And the planet which Khadja claimed was there and wasn't?"

The Klingon's eyes narrowed as his head went higher. "I think, as the Lieutenant Commander does, that the planet was moved."

Kirk remembered Uhura's speculation. Spock, though he would never admit he agreed with her on anything, was trying to calculate how it could be done.

"Move an entire planet, with a civilization on it, so far that our scanners can't find it?" As Talmari's eyes flashed dangerously, Kirk held up a hand. "You know me enough, Talmari," he said sharply, "to know I would not doubt a Klingon's word, not when his ship and crew are at stake. Nothing we know of has the power to do such an impossible feat."

"Kalandans?"

"Think, man," Kirk ordered tersely. "The Kalandans have the power to throw a planet that far, yes. But moving a civilization with it is something else entirely. Shielding would be needed to keep the atmosphere in and to prevent the houses and inhabitants from being destroyed by the acceleration through null-space. That would take immense power, Talmari. The Kalandans may be only tenuous allies of ours, but if they had a weapon like that, they would have used it long ago."

"Perhaps--" The Klingon stared at a Ch't'ra-ciba shield on Kirk's wall, taken as a trophy in a personal battle years ago. "Perhaps it was the Y'garu M'taj which was thrown out of position?"

"No. The log entries agreed with the course and drift of the probe. Are you familiar with the sea life of Earth?"

Talmari blinked at the incomprehensible change of subject. "Not very, no, sir."

"There's a fish there, a deep sea fish, called an angler. It has a fleshy growth on its head that resembles a fat worm attached to a long filament. The angler dangles the growth in the water, while it lies on the bottom, looking like no more than a brown rock. When prey comes along and grabs at the worm--" He snapped one hand over the other wrist.

"Who?" Talmari asked sharply.

"Unknown. If the planet is within scanning range of our farther reaching sensors, it should be easy to find. A body that size can't fall into

orbit around a star without disrupting orbital mathematics. That anomaly was what made Khadja probe it in the first place. A star with one planet would be extremely suspect. And I think if we don't find it, sooner or later it will find us. The *Enterprise* is much bigger prey for an angler fish than was the Y'garu M'taj."

"What if it's somehow a world-ship, protecting itself from invaders?"

Kirk smiled. "Talmari, I've found that in this universe the more devious answer is usually the right one."

Shortly before they reached the spot where the Y'garu M'taj had vanished, Spock strode unexpectedly into Kirk's cabin. Kirk looked up from the scanner reports as the Vulcan laid a tape square on his desk. "What's this?"

"The results of my simu-tests, Commander."

"The what?"

"You will note that the score has no deviation from the highest percentile. Lieutenant Uhura, however, demands that you countersign my exemption."

Kirk could barely keep his face straight. "Very well, Spock, consider yourself exempted."

"I do not understand why such testing was necessary in the first place. I see no purpose in Lieutenant Uhura's insistence."

Except that each of you is as mule-headed as the other, Kirk thought. "Why don't you try sending her flowers?"

Spock's face congealed. "Flowers?"

Kirk's twitching lips almost betrayed him. "The shock of it might psych her out for days."

"Indeed?" Spock said repressively.

Kirk began to shake as he saw the Vulcan consider the suggestion, but he held in the laughter until Spock closed the lift door; then he exploded.

The immensely powerful scanners of the warship finally located an anomalous system with eight planets, one of which orbited directly opposite the sun from another with the star acting as counterbalance. Even Spock was impressed--this system was 876 light-years from the Y'garu M'taj's last reported position. Kirk ordered a careful approach across the orbital plane, shields on full, even though there was no evidence of weaponry anywhere in the system.

Spock's monitors tallied the damage evident on the other planets in the system and projected the report onto the main viewing screen.

"Bringing its mass across the orbits of the other planets must have caused a tremendous planetary upheaval," Kirk said, frowning, as he studied the figures on the screen.

"Indeed." Kirk turned to face Spock, who now

stood behind his chair. "Yet the scanners show the Outsider to be not damaged at all. Whatever power brought it here is capable of shielding and controlling geothermal processes as well as atmospheric and surface conditions. A hypothesis I find difficult to accept. Physical laws of mass--"

"You think it's artificial?"

"Logic would indicate this, Commander, though our sensor readings do not support the theory."

"Anybody who can shove a planet this far without even dislodging the inhabitants' dishes can certainly falsify sensor readings, Spock." Kirk leaned forward. "We'll keep this distance, Mr. Korek. Maintain full sensor scans. Mr. Sulu, have the shuttlecraft readied for liftoff."

He punched a button on his chair. "Security. Uhura--"

"Here, Commander."

"Have a full surface commando team assemble in the shuttle bay within an hour. Quartermaster will pattern clothing after that of the inhabitants. Concealed weapons. But I want a ripper ray packed inside the shuttle, just in case."

"Aye, Commander." She cut off.

Kirk turned his chair once more. "Mr. Spock, you have an hour to find them a landing spot."

"I assume, Commander, that overly interesting spots are to be extremely suspect?"

Kirk grinned briefly. "You assume correctly."

Using such wariness as a guideline, the landing party, Uhura in command, overpassed an area of mountain range emanating a powerful, rhythmic energy, and set down near a city having a flat underlying field.

Aboard the *Enterprise*, Spock huddled over the viewer of his monitoring equipment. He frowned as he rechecked the results on the computer. "I fail to understand, Commander, why neither of those energy sources appeared in Khadja's probe report."

"Maybe because he came onto the planet cold. We're seeing it after it's been moved across space. Whatever power they used to do that might still linger as energy traces."

"In that case, they should be imperceptibly diminishing in energy." The Vulcan immediately cross-checked their first readings. "Energy levels now barely detectable. They would not have registered without deliberate checking."

Sulu leaned over and grinned at the Klingon helmsman. "See? I told you Captain Kirk must have had Kalandan ancestors."

Spock glowered disapprovingly at Sulu. Then, hands behind his back, he approached Kirk's chair. "I must admit, I, myself, am rather astonished at the frequent accuracy of your 'hunches,' Commander."

"Why, Mr. Spock, are you actually admitting logic doesn't hold all the answers?"

"I admit only that you seem better able than I to deal with the illogic of others."

Kirk snorted.

The landing party had been planetside for an hour and a half, with constant checks, all unfruitful as to the source of the lingering energy field, when Sulu abruptly gave a sharp exclamation and rechecked his panel. "Commander, we've lost contact with the landing party. The scanners fail to register their presence."

"Run another full scan; they may have gone underground. Mr. Korek, bring us around in a grid orbit."

The *Enterprise* circled the planet four times in a criss-cross pattern, but found no trace of Uhura and the others. If they had been killed, their collar and belt units would still be registering the last positions of their bodies. Kirk pulled speculatively at his bottom lip.

"Commander, we're at the limit of our intense scanning range," Sulu put in. "If we move closer, perhaps we could--"

"No," Kirk ordered. He smiled grimly. "The angler's put out another worm."

"Commander?" Sulu's puzzlement was evident on his face.

Kirk ignored the question. "Have another shuttle readied. We'll send it halfway down. If nothing attacks it, we'll beam a landing party into it. Ready a second security team." He did not see Spock leave his seat.

Very few captains left their ship. But then, very few captains had a Cait Second Officer ambitious underlings would have to get through before taking over the captaincy. The soft fur covering Caitian muscles was deceptive. M'riss was not happy she wasn't going to the planet below; her tail lashed warningly.

"The inhabitants are humanoids." Kirk smiled placatingly. "You'd stand out like a sore thumb."

"Hmph. Very well, but I am not pleased."

Cait displeasure was painful. Kirk strode to the transporter room, his ear stinging from M'riss' bite.

Spock, leading the security team, kept eyes forward as though he'd not seen the bite. Risking both top officers was unheard of, but they had done it before, and Kirk had a certain knowledge that the Vulcan would find some sound, logical reason to be there, even if he were ordered to stay.

Kirk saved his breath, but he could not resist an amused dig as he stepped onto the transporter platform. "All this concern for somebody you argue with on everything and agree with on nothing?"

Spock stared expressionlessly at the far wall.

"Your ear is bleeding, Commander."

Kirk lifted a hand to his ear. Almost simultaneously, as though that were a signal, the landing party was transported into the shuttlecraft. The crewmembers scurried to their assigned positions, and Spock piloted the craft to the planet below.

They disembarked, and Kirk spread out his security team. "Report every fifteen minutes. If you move out of a block's radius from your last reported position, I want to know about it." They checked communicators, to make certain their signals weren't being blocked out. "Spock, you take two and move off to the right. Investigate any opening that looks as though it leads downward. I think the whole answer lies somewhere under our feet. If we can't find an opening, we may have to blast one."

As the team split up, Kirk turned to Lt. Masaras, who was trying frequencies on his communicator. "Any sign of Uhura or the others?"

"No, sir."

Another of the elite ground troops frowned. "Commander, my tricorder's malfunctioning," she stated, checking her wrist unit. "For a few seconds I registered human life forms that way." She pointed. "But the signal's faded out, as if a stronger one is blocking it."

"It gives us a direction," Kirk said, setting off at a run. He was followed, then flanked by the security commandos.

The first shot struck Masaras high in the chest; the second exploded brick from the wall behind them. Kirk and Lt. Parker, in motion even as Masaras dropped, dove sideways into an alley in mid-run, rolled over, and came up with their phasers. Two beams caught the window across the street, and both glass and sniper hurled inward.

Kirk's face was grim. "Masaras?"

Lt. Parker flattened against the wall on her side of the alley, and risked a glance outward. Then her head came back. "Dead. Damn! Seems to be a solid projectile gun of some sort."

"I don't see any more motion over there. Let's see if the back way out is safe." They ran, covering their rear, and darted into the next block. Kirk stopped to report their change in position and the sniper. Frowning, he tapped the communicator with his fingernail. "Static on this." The energy force seemed to be overriding their instruments; could this be why Uhura and the others had lost contact?

A sound ripped the air. Kirk recognized it. "That wasn't a projectile gun--that was a disruptor! Let's go." Both sprinted toward the sound. Kirk laughed with relief as he saw two familiar figures standing over the body of what appeared to be a second sniper.

"Commander!" Uhura grasped his forearm on one side, Talmari the other.

"We lost contact with you." Kirk turned to the Klingon. "If it's any consolation, your duel was justified."

Talmari grinned. "I was never in any doubt,

Commander."

Kirk gave an answering grin, but sobered almost immediately. "What happened, and what in blazes is that?" The disruptor in Uhura's hand had three phaser units dangling from it by connecting wires.

"Everything was losing power," Uhura said with a shrug. "The communicators couldn't even begin to reach the ship, and our phasers had all the strength of waterlogged safety matches, so Talmari rigged all our weapons into one." She snorted. "Even that doesn't have the punch of one normal phaser, and, on top of everything, it's losing power."

Kirk went for this communicator. "Then the ripper ray will be useless, too. Kirk to Enterprise."

"...prise here," came through heavy static. "Losing contact--" Heavy hisses blocked out the rest.

"Energy drain on weapons and communicators. Maintain orbit and red alert. Shuttle with ripper rays to be sent to these coordinates in two hours. Landing party found." He repeated it twice more, to make certain it got through.

"--ceived... --tain orbit... --end shuttle and weapons...two hours--"

He snapped it off, looked at the others. "We have that long to find a way into the core of this planet, and I don't think we'll get any cooperation from the people around here."

"They do seem to have taken a disliking to us," Talmari said dryly, "ever since we came into this one section." He pointed. "There is a low, domed structure over that way. We caught a glimpse of it between the buildings. But we have not been able to work our way over."

"The rest of my ground force is attempting to circle round to the other side of it," Uhura said.

Kirk bent to pick up the sniper's weapon.

"Old-style projectile rifle," Uhura said. "There seems to be a limited number of bullets in it; we caught the sniper when he was reloading."

"Then we'll have to use carefully what we have. Our own weapons are soon going to be useless here."

Something dark and round lobbed in their direction, and Kirk had one instant's glance of it, before he dove and yelled, "Down!"

The explosion threw wood and brick powder over their heads. "Damn. We can't hold out against that with just a rifle." They climbed carefully to their feet. Kirk frowned thoughtfully. "Chemical weapons apparently have no problem operating here. I wonder--" He paused, then said, "Head for that dome. Parker, see if the communicators work enough to warn Spock and the others."

"He's here? Probably lost," Uhura said sarcastically. "Those pointy-eared computers have no sense of direction."

"Then go find him. We'll meet at the dome." Kirk gave her the coordinates of the section Spock had last been in. Uhura glared at Kirk, but moved

off like a wraith. Kirk grinned and shook his head, then ran toward the distant dome.

Deciding to imitate the snipers, Uhura took advantage of the flat rooftops. Near the section where the second team had started their search, she dropped to the ground.

From the abrupt sound of distant shooting, she could judge the position of the team. She ran in that direction. Not being seen by the enemy was a danger in itself; an explosive thrown at the hidden landing party caught her in the backwash. The ground beneath her shook from the force of the explosion. Uhura covered her head with her arms as building stones rained down on her.

She scurried to the wall closest to her, seeking its scant protection from the debris falling on all sides. Hugging the wall of the building, Uhura heard a crash from the cellar, as though something had toppled over from the shock waves of the crash. The crash was followed by a sharp cry in unmistakable Vulcan.

Uhura found a way into the building and swiftly located the door of the cellar. The energy drain made her handlight useless, so once inside the door she crouched on the landing before moving farther, letting her eyes get accustomed to the dimness of the shuttered interior. Then, warily, knife in hand, she worked her way down the stairs.

Two still figures on the cellar floor. Briefly, Uhura checked the alien--dead, his neck snapped in Tal-shaya. Then she turned to the other. "Spock!"

Uhura climbed over the debris to where he lay pinned down by the heavy shelving. She cried out as she saw his upper body covered with green blood. Going to her knees beside his head, she felt for a pulse in his neck. "Spock!"

His eyes opened. "I fail to see the reason for such hysteria, Lieutenant."

"But--you're bleeding!"

"I assure you, I am not."

She sank back on her heels. "Then what's all over you?"

Spock looked down at his chest. "I shudder to guess."

She touched the green with her fingers and cautiously brought it to her nose to sniff--then giggled. "Preserves." Relieved, she laughed uproariously.

"If you are quite finished," Spock said testily, "I would appreciate aid in removing this shelving."

Her first effort to move the shelving failed.

Spock gave her a look of long-suffering patience. "If Vulcan strength cannot lift it, it follows that human strength certainly cannot."

Uhura lifted her lips at him. "Not with mere

muscle strength, no." She left him and searched in the scattered tools of the cellar. When she returned with a bar of metal, the Vulcan gave a grunt of approval. She kicked a sturdy keg over to the shelves and rested the bar on it as a lever. When she applied her full body weight to the end of the bar, the shelves lifted slightly. "Can you slide out?"

He was already doing so. "Enough."

She let the shelves fall back. The First Officer was testing for injuries, but the brunt of the shelving unit's weight had fallen across another unit and had only pinned Spock. Finding nothing but minor cuts, he rose and distastefully tried to scrape off the clinging green.

"You sure you're not hurt?" Uhura questioned, eyeing the preserves once more.

"Lieutenant, I am perfectly all right. You will not speak again of this--incident."

Uhura grinned again. "How much is silence worth?"

His fingers suddenly stopped brushing and he stiffened. "I did not believe you would resort to blackmail."

She leaned on the bar, amused. "If I thought you'd give in to it, I wouldn't have made the offer."

"That is a totally illogical statement, Lieutenant," he said testily. "Shall we rejoin the others?" He moved toward the stairs.

"Mmm. I've finished rescuing you now."

The mutter which drifted back to her was unintelligible, but she could hazard a guess as to what the Vulcan was saying. "For someone who claims logic runs his life, you know an inordinate amount of descriptive adjectives."

Once outside, however, they instantly dropped the banter. Uhura crouched on a box above him, watching over a fence, while Spock kept guard on their backtrail. Briefly, she told him what had happened.

He grunted affirmation. "I was aware the communicators were having more and more difficulty in getting through. That strange energy field here drains all forms of power at a phenomenal rate. In spite of the seeming cultural level of the architecture, I have seen nothing but gas lights in these buildings; the drain must be continual and not merely a result of the planet's moving. What I do not understand is the discrepancy between such a power capability as that and the fact that the inhabitants are attacking us with rifles." He looked around once more. "Also, most of these buildings are abandoned."

"Perhaps they have no control over the planetary defenses," Uhura said. "I don't understand why there haven't been more attackers."

Vulcan ears were more acute than human ones. "Uhura--" he warned abruptly.

She had her knife out in an instant's motion. "They don't have guns."

Spock moved toward the wall at his right, to put it behind his back, his own blade in one hand, the other held with fingers flat. "A fortunate circumstance indeed."

Had the five men not attacked, Spock and Uhura would have done nothing, but the first man charged, and was met by the Vulcan's suddenly outthrust boot into his face. For the few seconds it took the rest of the attackers to reach their position, Uhura had the joy of watching Spock fight with the liquid motion of a powerful animal. He seized the first man by his belt and lifted him one-handed, hurling him forward into two of the others. All three went over.

Uhura caught the wrist of the man thrusting a knife at her, pulled it hard, and delivered a side-handed blow to the back of his neck as he went by. He didn't get up again. A second man received her hard-driven elbow, then a swift blow upward with the palm of her hand under his chin.

Spock sent one of the other three over his back and delivered a double-fisted chop against the second's neck. Spock's first victim, finally recovering his breath after being heaved around so easily, scrambled up and brought a wooden box splintering over Uhura's head. She dropped.

She rolled over defensively, but a thrown knife caught her attacker before he could use his own--on her. Spock retrieved his blade.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock..." Holding her throbbing head, Uhura pushed herself up.

Spock dusted himself off. "May I suggest you make no more such statements as the one you made before the attack?"

"Don't worry, from now on I'll keep my 'wondering' to myself. Ouch," she protested as his dispassionate fingers probed the back of her head.

"An insignificant wound."

"It's not your head," she retorted.

She had the suspicion he smiled behind that beard, before he abruptly gave a high, whistling signal. Once again, his ears had picked up something hers didn't.

A second later, the signal was repeated. In a few minutes, the other two crewmen in the Vulcan's command ran toward them.

They gave one exultant acknowledgment that Uhura was still alive, and their aid not needed here, then dropped into squatting positions, checking on the condition of the fallen aliens.

De Salle stumbled to his feet. "Bad news, sir," he reported, grim-faced. "We caught one of these people alive, and questioned him. They think we were the ones who flung their planet out of orbit, and they're trying to prevent us from doing it again. They saw aliens entering a dome-like structure near here and then their planet was jerked out of its star system. They're scared to death of us, otherwise we'd have been swarmed over by an army of them." He frowned. "They yelled an epithet at us, which had to refer to those other aliens--the closest approximation in translation is 'Grid-face.'"



Uhura sucked her breath in sharply. Only one race answered that description.

"The Vegans are here before us," Spock said flatly, and stood up. "We must warn the others..."

Kirk stared at the dome structure with narrowed eyes. "Any sign of a way in?"

"Seam along the far side might be a door," Lt. Parker reported. "Shall we try for that, sir?"

Kirk's decision was characteristically speedy. "Yes. Talmari, you cover us, then follow us in if we can force an entrance." The Klingon loped off to a vantage point, and as soon he settled in place with the altered disruptor, Kirk and Parker did some fast, broken-field running across the 200 years to the dome.

Kirk ducked behind an abutment as a shot struck the wall above his head. Crouching, he aimed the rifle toward the direction the shot had come from, but before he could fire the unfamiliar weapon, a disruptor beam sweep took out all the windows of the upper floor. The power of even that composite weapon was fading--it shattered only the glass and left some of the frames still standing. Kirk darted back to Parker.

"Something big hit this, Commander." She was examining the crack in the dome; it was almost wide enough to pass through. "This is a sliding door, but it's been buckled out of shape."

"Let me try." Kirk had used Leia Parker as a bodyguard on Empire planets and knew he could trust her with his life. He handed her the rifle, and, turning her back to him, she assumed a ready position. Kirk braced a boot against the doorframe and heaved back on the other edge with both hands. His arms strained until his vision started shimmering with gold flecks.

The door gave. "Leia--" She darted in after him.

Uhura and Spock found Talmari pinned down halfway between the buildings and the dome.

"The Commander?" Uhura shouted over the answering fire of their own stolen weapons.

"In the dome, with Parker--" Talmari yelled back. "Twenty minutes ago."

Spock and Uhura exchanged startled, frightened glances. "We have to get inside!" she said urgently.

"I do not think that possible." His eyes narrowly scanned the tops of the buildings. "They have Lt. Talmari well bottled up, and ourselves as well. We have another six minutes until the Enterprise sends us the ripper rays."

"But it's been twenty-six minutes already!"

Spock turned to her and she could see the same impotent rage and agony in the Vulcan's eyes as in her own. A human being couldn't survive against a Vegan for even thirty seconds. Spock turned aside,

but Uhura could see his gaze dart from cover to cover, as if seeking a suicidal way across the dome, in spite of the aliens' continuing barrage of fire. "The Commander is not a fool," he said harshly.

"I hope you're right, I hope you're right..."

"It's a machine, it's a gigantic machine," Kirk said, awed by the planet-moving complex spreading out around them in all directions. He peered over a wall and discovered that the machinery spiraled down for miles below their feet.

"Why aren't there inner defenses?" Lt. Parker worried, looking around warily.

"Either the builders thought nothing could get through their outer defenses, or they felt secure in the knowledge they could move the planet instantly." He stood up, looking around. "Then again, half this equipment looks dead. But keep alert. We don't know if this is all automatic or not."

"Yes, sir." She held her weapon at ready. "I don't trust this place either."

They moved cautiously downward, hunting a central core, or a control area. They had no time to sightsee. Even though Kirk was certain his ship was beyond the killing range of the planet's weapons, the artificial world was capable of a speed not even the Enterprise could match. If it suddenly attacked, the ship would have no chance at all. Kirk's worried frown deepened. He didn't understand why the planet hadn't attacked the Enterprise already. The angler had lured in its prey, and now failed to strike, an enigma which troubled his warrior mind more than if the planet had opened fire the instant the first landing party struck ground.

The corridor opened out into a vast area with rounded ribs of unknown machinery striping both sides of its walls. The far end was blocked by a convoluted spiral, like a DNA helix gone mad. Energy flowed up some of the ribs and the upper part of the spiral, in visible light pulses.

Kirk brought the back of his hand close to one of those conduits, but did not risk touching it. "Warm."

"So is this one." Frowning, Parker touched one of the dead units. "It must have just shut off."

Kirk checked some of the other rib-like units. In some, the power sputtered in the tubes at a level below his feet, as if it were blocked or interrupted. The nape of his neck prickled, and Kirk glanced warily around. He was well aware that the rumor that he had psi-bred Kalandan ancestors was bantered back and forth on the ship in light speculation; he discounted the rumor, and attributed his 'hunches' to his sharpened warrior's instincts. "Parker?"

She stood braced, listening. "I thought I heard another sound, a scraping of--" Her body jerked around. "Oh my God--"

Kirk had one horrifying glance of the oncoming Vegan before it struck the rooted Parker. She tore off two shots into the sensory gridwork in the second she had before the thing hit.

Kirk lunged toward it in that second, but was too far away. He cried out in rage and pain at the sound of her body slamming into a wall. Sliding to a stop, Kirk crouched low as the grey mass of the Vegan turned in his direction. Parker's wild shots had only hit the edge of the alien's gridwork; the rest of the Vegan's heat sensors swung to center on him.

Kirk couldn't see if Parker were dead, nor could he reach the rifle; and a knife against this thing was useless. Darting backward, he tried to confuse his heat emanations by running along the line of machinery. A Vegan's body might be heavy, but the arms and six-inch claws were lightning-swift. The Vegan cut off their exit, and Kirk ran across the open space, drawing it away from Parker.

Diving between two overhanging conduits, he crouched, breathing hard, the heat from the tubes blocking out his own body pattern for a few seconds. The Vegan began a scanning search of the area. Kirk knew that its radar could pick out his echo, so different from the echo of machinery, and would pinpoint his location.

On the slim chance that the energy drain operated only above ground, Kirk opened his communicator. "Talmari? Talmari?" He moved the dial back and forth uselessly. The high whine told him the drain worked here as well.

Kirk returned the communicator to his belt. He snorted suddenly. At least he had the answer to the planet's failure to attack the *Enterprise*, the reason for the dead machinery. Vegans fed on energy--any form of it. The power here must have drawn them like flies, and their feeding had interrupted the planet's attack weapons. If he hadn't been trapped with one, Kirk would have laughed at that irony--the Vegans may have saved his ship.

As the Vegan lumbered into his line of vision, Kirk erupted out from the conduits at a run. The full force of his body went behind the flying kick at one of the tripod legs. He felt it give beneath his boot, and then he was rolling wildly away from it.

A backhanded, glancing blow from a razor-sharp claw sent him crashing into a conduit. Kirk arched his body around on the floor and saw the Vegan coming at him. He pushed to his feet and staggered forward, holding his ribs. He had to stay out of reach of those arms.

One of the alien's legs hung loose, its jointed knee shattered. Kirk doubted the thing felt pain; its nervous system was buried deep under the rock-like folds of skin.

He had to take out the sensor grid or he'd never make it past the thing. The Vegan was systematically driving him back toward Parker. Kirk ran hard for the rifle and snatched it up, fleeing for the other side of the chamber.

On the run, Kirk checked out the rifle. He cursed quietly and competently. The Vegan's initial blow had destroyed any hope of its use as a projectile weapon. Kirk spun, the rifle held like a club. But the Vegan lumbered for him, his position outlined perfectly in the sensor grid; Kirk knew he would have no chance for an unblocked swing.

One last, desperate hope. Kirk tore out his

communicator and twisted the dial on full, then hurled it across the floor toward the oncoming alien. The Vegan stopped short, its head questing. The shrill whine confused its sound image for a split second.

Kirk moved in and swung the butt end of the rifle with all his force into the facial grid two feet above his head. Then he screamed as the claws he had tried to avoid lashed out and scored a triple line across his back.

The blow stunned him. He had a flashing glimpse of the blinded Vegan lashing out, trying to find him.

"Jim!"

Kirk lifted his head. Behind the Vegan's blocking mass, he saw Spock with a long tube braced over his shoulder. Uhura was coming toward him in a running crouch.

When she crossed the alien's path, the ruined head swung toward her, confused; Kirk knew it must momentarily have appeared that his heat and sound image had split in two. The distraction gave Kirk enough time to get to his feet.

Spock shouted as he aimed the tube toward the swaying mass. "Jim--'Penda--get away from it--!"

Kirk staggered in the opposite direction as Uhura. The roar of Spock's weapon exploded in his eardrums, and the backwash hurled him into the wall.

When Kirk regained consciousness, he found himself lying on his stomach, someone's hands swiftly staunching the gashes on his back. He tried to twist around to see what was happening in the room.

"Don't move, sir. These are deep." Uhura's hand pressed his shoulder and he subsided, knowing she would not be there if they were still in danger.

"The Vegan?" He found his speech slurred--she must have hit him with painkiller.

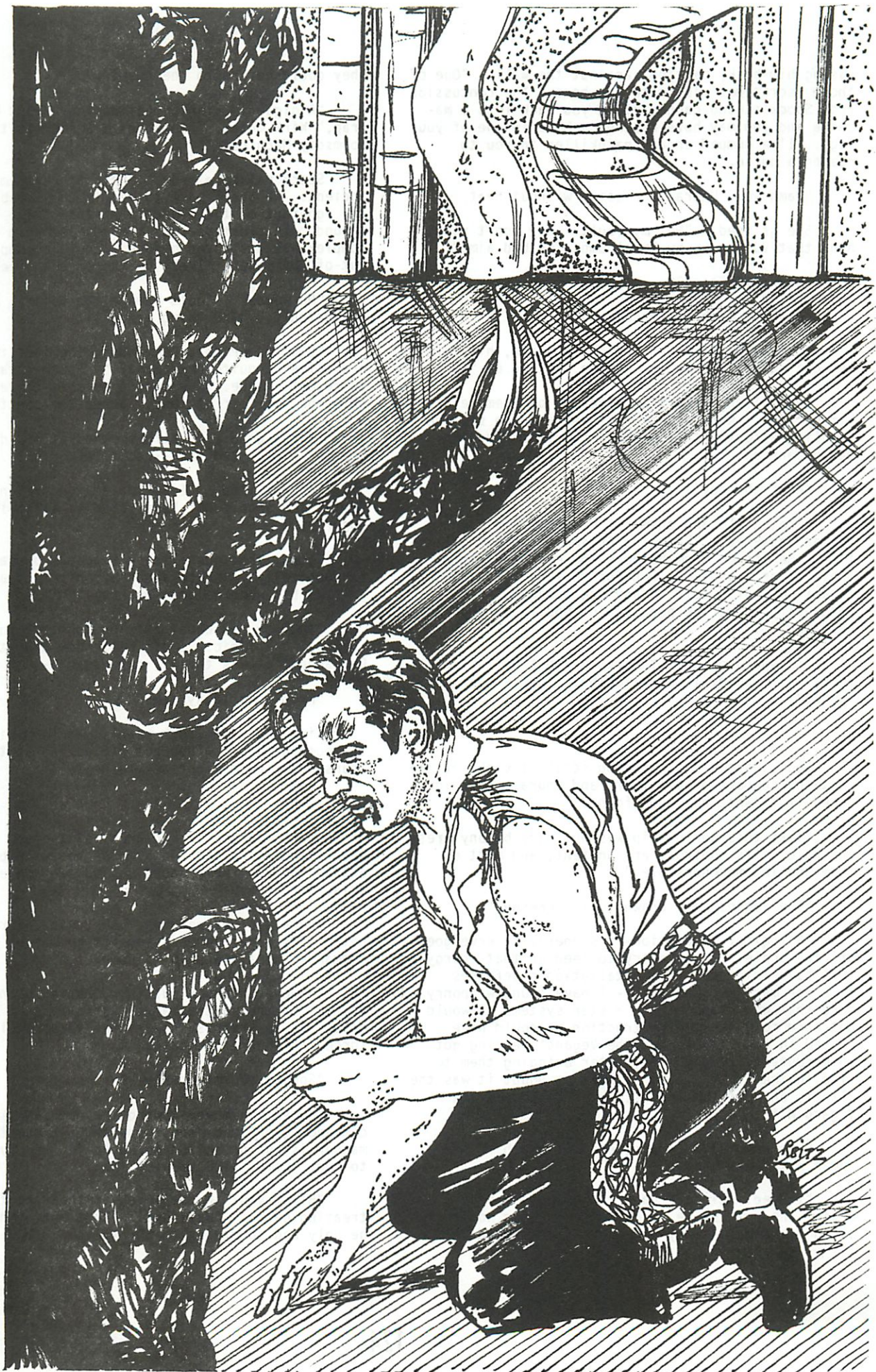
"Dead. Our ripper rays took out the others hidden near the surface of the weapons complex. Once Mr. Spock cuts off the draining mechanism, we can run a scan to see if there are any more, deeper in the planet." He heard the smile in her voice. "Nobody upstairs is going to believe a human being could take on a Vegan, unarmed, and incapacitated the thing."

A captain's duty is to his people. Kirk tried to sit up. "Parker..."

Uhura pushed him down gently but inexorably. "Smashed spinal column, but she'll make it. Com-mandos are tough." Her gentle fingers stopped their ministrations. "That should do it, until Dr. McCoy can--"

Kirk tried to struggle to his feet once more. It must have been a massive injection. "You think I'm letting McCoy touch me for a few scratches--" Uhura caught him when he fell sideways, surprised by his body's refusal to cooperate.

"A little more than that, sir," she drawled,



easing him back, panting, against the wall. "One of those 'scratches' is in to the bone. The concussion from Spock's hand cannon flung you back into a machine and you may have cracked a bone in one of your legs. I've pumped enough painkiller in you to deaden a horse."

"Damn you, Uhura," he said, without heat.

She grinned. "Not my fault. Why don't you hang that Vulcan up by his thumbs for bad aim?"

"Where is Spock?"

"Playing with the machinery."

"Get me up." He struggled up again, his left leg out stiff. "Damn it, 'Penda, get me up."

She called Talmari and the two of them levered him upright. Kirk almost faltered when he saw the peculiar assortment of weapons the third landing party carried.

"What the devil--"

"Projectile and chemical weapons, sir," an ensign answered. "From the Armsmaster's own collection. He issued them because the energy drain will inhibit the use of our own for so long. Er--Lieutenant Sulu also said if any are damaged, he will personally shove the perpetrator bodily through the nacelles."

"It would destroy the matter/anti-matter balance," Kirk said, lips twitching. "Let's go find Spock."

Spock gave a disapproving scowl at sight of the captain, supported by Talmari and Uhura. Kirk ignored it. "What have you found?"

"That this world-ship was not made by any present race. Its controls are ancient, and most of them are incomprehensible."

"The Vegans were drawn to its energy?"

"A logical assumption--its energy reserve goes off the scale. Their entry to feed on that energy must have triggered the installation's defenses. It is a war machine, Commander--I have found weaponry here that would annihilate a star system. I would not care to guess the destruction it could have caused in the Empire, had the Vegans' feeding not interrupted its functions, after bringing them to life in the first place. I have no doubt it was the planet, and not the Vegans, which destroyed the Y'garu M'taj."

Kirk nodded. He had guessed as much. "The Vegan hive-ship as well?"

"Indeed. Since I have cut off the energy drain, the now usable tricorders register no other alien presences. They were likely destroyed before

they could return to their ship."

"A gigantic, innocuous-looking, Venus Fly Trap," Kirk mused. "Somebody's answer to the Doomsday Machine?"

Spock raised a brow. "Both are extremely ancient. We shall have to see if the inhabitants are ignorant of the planet's history." He looked around. "A great deal of the equipment in the complex was destroyed before I could accomplish the cut-off of power, likely by the aliens' feeding."

"No wonder I could damage the Vegan," Kirk said disgustedly. "The thing was gluttoned."

"Gluttoned or not, Commander, the fact that you are alive is quite phenomenal." Spock straightened to report stance. "We should be able to reach the ship now, sir, or at least launch the shuttlecraft."

"Thash good..." Kirk frowned at his distorted speech. "Blashted shot--can't talk right..."

Spock smiled. "I am amazed you are on your feet. You should not have tried to walk with such injuries."

"Isn't that just like a Vulcan?" Uhura said sarcastically. "Knock a man off his feet and then yell at him when he gets back up."

"And you, as usual, string together facts with irritating illogic. I did not knock down the Commander, it was the air concussion--"

"From your lousy aim--"

Kirk began to laugh weakly, as Talmari tried the communicator. They got him as far as the transporter room floor before he fell.

War Commander Kirk glared, slit-eyed, at the pair standing at the foot of the bed with bland expressions on their faces. "You two are enjoying this, aren't you?"

Uhura's brows went up. "Us, sir? Certainly not. It's never an occasion for rejoicing when the commander of a starship is down."

"However," Spock put in. "Having both been victims of the particular ministrations of Dr. McCoy, it is--refreshing--to see someone else being forced to endure the same."

"Spock, you miserable--"

The Vulcan moved toward the door as if his commanding officer hadn't spoken. "Since the Commander is out of action for a while, we have a ship to run. Come, Lieutenant."

"Blast you!" he bellowed at their hastily retreating backs. "Wait until I get out of here!" If he only had something to throw...✱

HIDE AND SEEK

BEVERLY GRANT

"You have found it." The words were slow, measured. . .and definitely not intended as a question.

Vader's young aide cleared his throat nervously. "Yes, my Lord. She didn't use a Jedi doctor, and the record was in her maiden name, which is why we failed to locate it immed. . ."

"I am not interested in a recital of your ineptitude, Komas."

"N-no, my Lord!" Komas hastily extracted a tape from the pouch on his belt, then--carefully, as though with a well-founded suspicion it might explode in his hand--set it on the Dark Lord's desk.

The black-robed figure behind that desk gazed silently at his aide an uncomfortable moment longer. Finally, "That will be all, Komas. You may go."

And Komas went.

* *

So, the rumors were correct. Vader supposed it should have been obvious to him when Coryn had provoked the fight that led to his departure. Not that the split hadn't been inevitable; his wife had been far too besotted with the Jedi myth to ever accept his choice of the Dark side. Still, now that he allowed himself to think about it, Coryn's behavior had been markedly out of character that last week. She'd been edgy, almost frantic--and spoiling for a fight. She could not chance my following her to learn her secret. Since she could never have had her way once I knew, she deliberately maneuvered me into leaving!

And the man who had once called himself Anakin Skywalker had drowned his suspicions in feverish planning, convincing himself that the destruction of the Jedi depended on his total concentration. But the truth was, he hadn't wanted to know anything that could have forced his return. She'd been beautiful, she'd been royal--quite a catch even for a Jedi Knight. But the woman had a tongue like a lightsaber--so did the rest of her family. Never marry the sister of a senator!

Now Lord Vader gazed sourly at the fragment of a medical report showing on his tape viewer. "Organa, Coryn," it read in part. "Alderaani. Age: 23. Result of pregnancy test, positive. Gestation

in first weeks. Estimated date of delivery, 26th Ildin. Preliminary test to determine sex of fetus, inconclusive. No prior pregnancies. . ." The date of the report coincided precisely with the onset of his wife's aberrant behavior.

Vader clicked off the tape viewer and closed his eyes. He stretched out through the Force, searching. Somewhere out there in the galaxy was a child, a child with the Skywalker genes and, no doubt, the Skywalker gift of Force-sensitivity. His child--his son, somehow the Dark Lord was sure of it. Whether the boy was with Coryn or, given the rumors of her death, with some other weak-bellied Jedi sympathizer, Vader knew that no effort would be spared to poison the child's mind against the powers of the Dark side, against the Empire, against his own father.

And something would very definitely have to be done about that.

* *

'Regal' was not a word that sprang to mind when describing Arel Enares, either before or since her marriage to His Majesty (and currently Senator) Bail the Fifth had added royal Organa to her name. She was short, plump, and possessed of brownish-blond hair so determined to frizz at the merest hint of humidity that she had taken to constraining it in an unflattering coil of double buns just to keep it out of her way. Intelligent, ironic, competent, and good-natured, the Queen Consort was adored by her husband and generally both respected and liked by her aides in the Ministry of Education. Still, probably no one but Bail Organa would have thought to cast her as a monarch, even as a constitutional one.

Some slight sound caught her attention; Arel stored the speech she'd been working on in the handheld computer, then placed it carefully well back on one of the higher nursery shelves.

"Drink?" Their four-year-old niece eyed the Queen drowsily from a tangle of arms, legs, and faces that included at least eleven dolls, a stuffed toy Wookiee (the latter somewhat improbably dressed in a Llewion slave-dancer's skirt), and the sleeping Princess--Leia Mirin Tiana Sheian Sareth Organa, two years old on the first Ildin some four months earlier.

"Drink," the Queen confirmed, "then bathroom and bed. . .and a story."

The child's face passed from supplication through outrage to bliss in the time it took to register the entire sentence. "Story!"

"Shh!" Arel was beginning to nurse hopes of getting Leia to bed without the customary hour of floor-walking--provided she could keep the Princess' cousin from awakening her.

Scooping the older girl into her arms, she paused to gaze down at her adopted daughter. Leia slept, peacefully for once, her dark baby lashes arrayed on chubby, infant cheeks and her right thumb tucked comfortably into her mouth. She was tiny, even for her age--delicate of bone like all the Organa women and with the same dark hair and eyes, and could easily have been Bail's child (unlike her absent twin, the quintessential Skywalker blond).

Adopting Leia had been meant as a ruse, a way of allowing Coryn Skywalker to mother at least one of her twins in relative safety. With Bail's widowed sister Shejan already enjoying the shelter of the Organa residence, it was probable that no one had given more than a passing thought to the return of yet another royal sister--or connected her presence with the subsequent birth of the Organa heir. The infant Princess had been taught, as a precaution, to call Arel 'mama.' And if she spent more time in Coryn's chambers than in those of her supposed parents, no one outside the family circle could be any the wiser.

Then, less than a season ago, Coryn Skywalker's fatal accident had been followed by the birth of Arel's stillborn son. Perhaps it had been tiny arms clutching her neck while the little Princess sobbed for a mother Arel knew could never return, perhaps her husband's wide brown eyes looking up at her from Leia's face, perhaps nothing more than her own grief--Arel herself could not have said. She knew only that the Princess was no longer 'Coryn Skywalker's baby' but hers, hers and Bail's. If the doctor was right, Leia was the only child they would ever have. And Arel loved her with a totally unaccustomed fierceness.

The four-year-old squirmed impatiently, and Arel shifted her to a more comfortable position. "Right away, Your Ladyship. One glass of water coming up." Carrying her into one of two bedrooms that opened off the nursery play area, she suited action to her words. A few minutes later she was backing through the door, promising a story as soon as she had put Leia to bed.

And cold fear danced itself down her spine before she had a trace of sight or sound to warn her.

* *

Except for the portion of one wing occupied by Senator Organa and his family, Alderaan's Summer Palace was open to the public at almost all hours. It was guarded, of course, both to ensure the privacy of the royal family and to safeguard valuable relics of a once more powerful monarchy. But the security system that could stop a Jedi Knight turned

Sith Lord had yet to be invented. Darth Vader entered with the tourists and made his way to the heart of the family quarters with ridiculous ease. Even before he arrived, he had known the identity and location of the only adult present.

* *

"Anakin?"

Arel's mind had room for but one agonized thought--not how he had gained entry, but that he stood between her and the child he had come to claim.

"Arel."

The voice coolly acknowledging her greeting was so utterly different from the voice she had known as Anakin Skywalker's that it tore her eyes away from the tiny Princess and forced her to really look at him for the first time since Coryn's husband had been a frequent guest of the Organas. Her mind remembered his image: a strongly handsome face framed by golden hair, a heartbreaking smile curving well-cut lips. What she saw now squeezed her eyes shut in unexpected pity. To spend the rest of your life trapped in that. . .that. . .walking sarcophagus. . . Anakin, they should have let you die!

"That thought has occasionally occurred to me," he said without any hint of emotion, "but the fact is they did not."

Breath caught in Arel's throat, strangling the pity and replacing it with near panic. Kerid! Maybe he can't actually read my thoughts; but if he can sense what I'm feeling that clearly, it comes to the same thing! Cursing her unwariness, she fought to close her mind to his. Like anyone privy to government secrets, she had been conditioned to withstand interrogation, even interrogation by a Jedi. She had no idea whether it would work against a Dark Lord of the Sith.

"You know why I have come."

Arel shook her head. "I never liked anyone poking around in my mind. If you will be rude, Anakin, you had better prepare to be shut out." A pause. "Is it about Coryn?"

"She is of no interest to me." His voice turned almost gentle. "Where is my son, Arel? I can feel your fear, but it is unnecessary. I have no wish to harm you. Tell me where to find him, and I will leave."

Somewhere deep in her mind a voice exulted, He wants Luke, not. . .! She stopped the thought, ashamed of her reaction and frantic lest, even at that level, her feelings might betray the sleeping Princess.

"Anakin. . ."

"I prefer to be called Darth Vader. It's an honorable title. . ." At her movement of protest, he raised his hand, gloved palm forward. ". . .And one I've earned, however you may feel about it. Now tell me," as he began walking slowly toward her, "where have you hidden my son?"

How long can I keep him out? How long?

He cupped her chin in his left hand, tilting her face upward as though to fix her eyes with his own, as though trying to sense beyond them to the secret she held. "My son, Arel."

"Your son is dead!" Angrily, she twisted out of his grip, came near to slapping him before a wave of fear stopped her, shaking, almost nauseated. In all the time she'd known him, Arel had never imagined she could be personally afraid of Anakin Skywalker, regardless of his crimes toward others. Even tonight, her terror had been of losing the child, not of any personal harm he might do to her. But this fear came like--no, not like but was an assault, an emotion he deliberately created within her mind; it all but overwhelmed her.

"It's true. . ." She was half-sobbing now with the effort of fighting it, of staying sufficiently in control to keep from blurting out the information he desired. "Coryn miscarried. I'm sorry, Anakin! You should have been told, but no one thought. . ."

"Mama?"

Her sleepy voice startled both adults, drew Arel's hand tight against her mouth. **Leia, no! Don't attract his attention! Please!**

And Vader turned at the sound to find himself staring into Coryn's wide brown eyes. For one incredible, suspended instant, he thought he'd found the child he sought--not son but daughter! Then time resumed its flow; logic took over. Not Coryn's eyes, but Bail's. This must be the little Princess. . .what was her name? . . .Leia? . . .that he'd heard about while he was still in the hospital, recovering from his near brush with death after the battle with Obi-wan Kenobi.

In wry amusement, Vader watched Arel snatch the child away, retreating to the far side of the room with the tot in her arms. **Does she think me so depraved I'd harm a baby?** Suddenly he was not amused; that thought stung. **We were friends once; she should know me better!** Still, if his former sister-in-law was fool enough to believe in the possibility, he might be able to turn a bluff to his advantage.

The Dark Lord of the Sith stalked silently in her wake, stopping only when he towered over the Organa Queen. Resting one hand purposefully near the hilt of his lightsaber, he resumed their conversation. "No, Arel, you will not lie to me. I have heard the rumors you carefully planted about my son's demise--that Coryn died in giving birth to a stillborn child, that she miscarried, even that she killed her own baby rather than mother the 'Jedi-killer's' son. None of the rumors are true. I have felt his existence, Arel. He lives! Where have you hidden my son?"

Clutching Leia protectively against her shoulder, Arel tried to display an air of sympathy. "Anakin. . ."

He shifted menacingly.

". . .Darth, then. I understand how you feel, believe me! Bail and I. . .just lost a son of our own. But you have to accept reality."

"Very well, Arel. I am willing to be convinced. Open your mind to me and let me see the truth of what you say."

The silence was like a living thing.

Finally, hopelessly, "Your son was dead at birth."

"No!" His furious shout set Arel's daughter crying, and he could sense another girl-child cowering in one of the nursery bedrooms. "If you will not help me find my son. . ."

He raised one hand. Slowly, precisely, a finger crooked toward the tiny Princess. Leia coughed, began to choke.

"Anakin! No! You can't!" With one hand, she dragged ineffectually at his upraised arm.

"Quickly, Arel! I would not like to damage her permanently."

"Anakin, please!" The child's body stiffened in agony. And Arel capitulated. "Luke is with Obi-wan Kenobi!"

Instantly Leia's choking ceased. She gulped in air in breaths that were audible even over the Queen's relieved weeping.

"The next time you refuse to answer my questions, your daughter will die. Do you understand that?"

Head bent to Leia's, Arel nodded.

"I am pleased. Now, you have told me that my son's name is Luke and that he is with Obi-wan Kenobi. Where?"

"Somewhere in the Outland Region. . ." In sudden haste, "Anakin, that's all I know! I swear it! Obi-wan sent Coryn reports three times a year. They were picked up on a different planet each time. The messengers never saw Kenobi or the child. I don't believe even Coryn knew where they were! She said the only way to keep you from forcing the truth out of one of us was if none of us knew! Anakin, please believe me!"

Vader regarded her silently. He could sense her desperation, shame at having betrayed Luke's existence, above all her fear for the little girl in her arms. He sensed also that she was still hiding . . .something. Should he probe further? But what if she resisted? He might be forced to kill the child, and he was not a destroyer of infants! Moreover, the feeling grew within him that whatever she was concealing, it was not the location of his son.

The Dark Lord made his decision. Without a word, he turned and strode from the Summer Palace.

* *

Arel walked the floor with Leia for two hours before exhaustion claimed them both, granting a troubled sleep. Her last conscious thought was for a little boy at that moment playing on a world she had never seen. Luke, forgive me!

* *

Vader's aide stood stiffly to attention. "We have found no trace of the Jedi criminal, Obi-wan Kenobi, my Lord. Do you wish us to expand our search beyond the Outland Region?"

"Do so. And post a reward for information leading to his capture. Make it plain that the reward will be paid only if he is found alive."

"Yes, my Lord."

He will be found. Meanwhile, my power grows stronger. We will meet again, Obi-wan; and I promise that when we do, it will be a very different fight. *



A New Hope

Princess.
What princess?

"But they're gonna kill her!"*
"Better her than me!"

Princess.
Automatic protest, fear,
One last chance/hope:
Your luck is in, Solo.
A princess--one of a
Vanished breed.
You thought.

Princess.
Yeah, Chewie, I know.
Help me?
Could she help me?
Ask could she lift the chains from my heart
And teach me to love.
Ask could she break through the past
And make me a man.
Ask could she see beyond
This outer shell, brassy and hard,
To the center, enchanted
And stranded out here in the stars.

So, let's go rescue your princess, kid.

Princess.
Don't hope for a friend or a lover.
A princess could never want only a man.
She will wait for a prince, for a hero, a
sacrifice,
None of which you can afford to be--
Are allowed to be by the rules;
All of which you were foretold to be
By the fools who predestined a man--
Just a man--
And you're trapped.

Princess.
The last one,
The only you've heard of
In thousands of passages lost in the years.

Princess.
A young one with beauty to grow into grace--
But the tongue needs to mellow,
The wit is too sharp;
And she's seen you, Lone Trav'ler,
With the eyes of the heart.
Put your guards up,
Your fences,
Your barriers.
Now!
Fill the moat;
Raise the drawbridge:
And don't let her in!

"Well, what do you think of her?"
"I'm trying not to, kid."

Don't let her out.

Princess.
Will you take me to live in your palace--
Though it be footloose and frantic and danger
beside?
May I eat from your practical idealist's plate
And drink from your sturdy cup?
Will you marry me, give me your love
With only your hopes to support who I am
That I say I am not?

Princess?

"I couldn't go and let you take all the
reward!"
"I knew there was more to you than money!"

Princess.

Jean L. Stevenson

*All quotes from STAR WARS IV: A New Hope, story and screenplay by George Lucas

A TORT ET A TRAVERS SHERYL ADST

(or, One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night)

That Bodie was sleeping alone was unusual enough, but that this was by his own choice made it a rare event indeed.

He'd been pleasantly tired after a light day of training: computer games in the morning with Dr. Ross, and a workout at the gym in the afternoon. It would have been the perfect evening to spend in quiet conversation with Janet, whose job at the Ministry as an information specialist often provided unique and amusing insights into everyday events.

However, when he reached for the phone to ring her up, he was struck with an incredible lassitude. Before he consciously realized what he was doing, he got undressed and into bed. Some other time, luv, he promised as he drifted into sleep.

He wasn't sure if he felt or heard the low frequency vibrations that penetrated his awareness some time later. He awoke completely, though, when the bed shifted sideways and abruptly dropped three feet. There was the sound of small thunder in the room and a faint whiff of ozone tickled his nose. **Damn!** he thought, trying to calm his suddenly racing pulse. **How Shirley can sleep through an earthquake, I'll never know.** He continued to mutter imprecations on the Californian to himself as he sat up slowly.

The next thing he was aware of was that he was not alone in the room.

He eased his hand toward the gun hidden by the bed, slipped the weapon under the covers, and switched on the bedside lamp, aiming the beam toward the foot of the bed where subtle sounds indicated the intruder to be.

When he caught sight of the petite female that stood before him, the complete incongruity of the situation made him blurt out the first thought that came to mind. "Well, at least you're not wearing those ridiculous double buns anymore."

The young woman in the white ski suit and dark braids smiled briefly and said, "As I am no longer a member of the Imperial court, I see no reason to maintain their impractical styles."

By this time, Bodie had just about convinced himself he was still asleep. This illusion was shattered when the phone rang and he reached over to pick up the receiver; there had been no change in his state of consciousness. He was awake, and listening to the rapid beeping that told him the other party was calling from a pay phone. The pips stopped when the money fell into the coin box and he heard his partner say, "You're not alone, are you?"

"C'mon, Doyle. What kinda question is that for this hour of the night?" Bodie answered, keeping an eye on the young woman, who had been startled by the phone but had relaxed when she had identified the source of the noise.

"Carrie Fisher look-alike?" Doyle asked. "Appeared suddenly about a few minutes ago, along with some unusual physical effects?"

"Yeah," Bodie said, puzzled. "How'd you guess?"

There was a chuckle on the other end. "I've just had a close encounter of my own. It seems the two of 'em got separated in transit. There's a lot that needs to be explained--"

"You're telling me."

"--so we'll be over in a few minutes and everything can be told at one time," Doyle said.

"Sounds good."

"Oh, by the way," Doyle's voice dropped to confidential levels, "you'd better watch yourself. She really is a princess." He hung up, and Bodie was left staring at the receiver in his hand.

"Don't tell me," the young woman said. "That was a friend of yours, asking if I were here."

What's going on? Everybody wants to get into the psychic act. "Okay," Bodie replied, mischief in his eyes, "I won't tell you."

A look of exasperation flitted across the woman's face, then she schooled her features into calmness. "I must apologize for any discrepancies in my use of language," she said. "I am not accustomed to the ways of the Force in these things."

Now it was Bodie's turn to try to recover his senses. "The Force?" he sputtered. "You mean, you're not speaking English?"

"I'm speaking my native Alderaani," she replied, "and I am hearing your responses in the same language, except for such words as have no common meaning, such as the word you just used--'English.'"

"That's the language I'm speaking--and hearing," Bodie explained, beginning to believe the reality of what was happening in spite of--or perhaps because of--the strangeness of it all.

She shrugged and said, "To each his own. At any rate, if your friend and Aithne are on their way here, I suggest you make yourself presentable." She turned away and headed for the living room.

"Yes, Your Worship," Bodie said softly, finally understanding Han Solo's motivation for the remark. The princess did not respond verbally, but he noted a slight stiffening of her walk as the words reached her ears.

A few minutes later, he surveyed himself in the mirror as he brushed his short, dark brown wavy hair. Just under six feet tall, at 12 1/2 stone, he considered himself in fighting trim. It shouldn't have to come to that, he thought, removing a stray piece of lint from his brown cord pants and allowing the gold knit shirt to fall into calculatedly casual folds. He was relying on what he called his 'native charm' to ingratiate himself with the young woman in the next room.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked as he joined her. "Coffee? Tea?"

"Tea?" she said curiously, looking up from her thoughts. "A herbal infusion? Yes, you may." She settled back into aloofness, and Bodie proceeded to the kitchen without further remark.

Whatever planet she's come from, he thought, considering her attire, she brought plenty of ice with her. He put enough water in the kettle for four, remembering his partner was bringing another 'visitor' with him. I wonder what luck the bionic golly's had, Bodie mused.

The kettle had just begun to whistle when the door buzzed. Bodie turned down the heat, then crossed to the intercom. "That you?" he asked, not at all surprised to hear Doyle answer, "Who'd you think it was?" He pressed the button that allowed his partner into the building, unlatched the door, and went back into the kitchen to finish making the tea.

The curly head that came through the door first

was not Doyle's brown mop, but a crown of copper that practically lit up the room. Beneath it was a girl--Bodie put her age between fifteen and sixteen--with sparkling green eyes and a splash of freckles. She had a coltish look about her, as though she'd just done a spurt of growing and hadn't quite gotten used to her new proportions. In one hand was a stoppered vial, and the way she was holding it spelled 'precious' to Bodie's trained eyes.

Doyle had followed the girl into the room, but although he had a couple of inches on her--being just a trifle shorter than Bodie--he was completely overshadowed. He was grinning, and there was a light in his own green eyes that said he knew the effect the girl was having on his partner.

"Oi," Bodie called from the kitchen. "Give me a hand with this."

Doyle excused himself and joined his friend, helping him set out cups and saucers on a tray.

"Since when have you taken to robbing the prams?" Bodie asked, checking the sugar and milk.

"Since you've started entertaining princesses," Doyle replied. He opened a cupboard, didn't see what he wanted, then looked into the bread drawer. "Anne," he announced, pulling out a package of chocolate cookies.

"Anne?" Bodie said curiously. "What's Anne got to do with this?"

"Always puts the biscuits in the bread drawer," Doyle said. He arranged the cookies on a plate, placed the plate on the tray, and took the tray into the living room.

"How'd you know that?" Bodie asked, following him out. His only answer was a smile from the other.

"You may want to taste this first," Doyle was saying to the princess. "We have something to make it taste sweeter, and milk, of course." He poured a small amount of tea into a cup and handed it to her. She took a sip, then handed it back.

"Please, a little bit of sweetener," she said.

Doyle continued to play the host, so Bodie took a chair at right angles to the couch where the two young women were seated. A spoonful of sugar was added to the teacup, and the resulting mixture passed muster. Doyle looked next to the redhead.

"I'll have whatever you're having," she said, watching him fill the remaining cups halfway with milk and add tea and sugar. She took the cup offered her, but waited until Doyle had handed Bodie a cup and taken one of his own before tasting the concoction.

Bodie decided he'd been in the background long enough. "Do you like it?" he asked Leia.

She looked at him for a second, then replied, "It's warm, soothing. Every world has its own variety." Another second went by in silence before she spoke again. "Perhaps introductions are in order, although it appears you already know of me. I am

Leia Organa."

Next to her, the redhead swallowed a mouthful of tea quickly and said, "Aithne Forwyss-deLangue."

"Ray Doyle."

It was his turn. "Bodie," he said simply.

That got a response from the princess. "Just ...Bodie?"

"There's more on his birth certificate," his partner jumped in with, "but he won't answer to any of it."

Bodie smiled at Leia, throwing in a touch of shyness. This young woman was turning into a real challenge, and Bodie was not above using whatever means were at his disposal to win her over. If a certain amount of acting were necessary...

"Bodie," the princess repeated quietly, as though she were filing the name away. Then, in an abrupt change of mood, she was all business. "Tell us what you already know. We won't waste time repeating information."

The two men looked at each other, then Doyle began explaining about the film STAR WARS. He was concise and to the point, an ability that had earned him commendations when he was a copper and was still appreciated in CI5. He concluded with the destruction of the *Death Star*, and then threw in a few speculations about the soon-to-be-released sequel.

"Yes, I suppose I can tell you our base is now located on Hoth," Leia said, with an involuntary shiver, "and calling it merely an 'ice' planet is a bit of an understatement." She paused, looking somewhat unsure of how to proceed. "You mentioned the Force in your account. From your attitude, I am led to believe you are not aware of its workings in your universe."

"Not under that name, perhaps," Doyle said, "and not precisely what you may mean by 'the Force.' It becomes a question for semanticists and philosophers."

"You're the first concrete evidence we've had," Bodie added, "or that we've heard of, anyway."

"And you're still not completely sure we're real," Aithne commented, "or that you're not still asleep." Under the sudden scrutiny that remark produced, she pinkened slightly, then reached for a cookie and began to nibble on it.

"Be that as it may," Leia went on, "acceptance of the Force as a reality will be necessary to accomplish our mission."

"Which is?" Bodie said, trying to keep his growing impatience from showing.

The young woman from Alderaan sighed. "There has been a massive disturbance in the Force," she said, "caused by some sickness--or toxic condition, we don't know which--in one of our Force-sensitive individuals."

"Luke Skywalker, to be exact," Aithne chipped in, only to receive a quick cut-off gesture from the

princess. "But they already know about him," the redhead said defensively, "and they just don't seem like the Imperial type."

Leia regarded the men. "We were told the Force would find someone to help us wherever it was we were going. Aithne is right; you do not look like the Imperial type, and you are the chosen ones. Nevertheless, it might be wise to find out just who and what you are before the rest of the mission is explained."

"Civil servants," Bodie said, handing out the usual line.

Leia looked askance, though Aithne muttered. "All is not lost yet."

"Law enforcement," Doyle added. "An organization called CI5--Criminal Intelligence Five, using the methods and equipment of military intelligence agencies against the criminal element."

"And crime is defined--how?"

"We have written laws, made by representatives elected by the people," Doyle responded.

Leia nodded, evidently reassured their goals were similar. Not to be outdone by his partner's contributions, Bodie added, "We also have a queen." The merest hint of a smile tugged at the princess' mouth, and Bodie began to hope the iceberg might yet thaw.

"You work together for this CI5?" the princess asked. Doyle simply nodded.

"Partners," Bodie said.

"Trust the Force, Leia," Aithne whispered. "We have no other choice."

"Yes," the young woman said, almost reluctantly, "although it is also the Force that's responsible for our being here. You see," she said, addressing the two men, "due to this problem with Luke, wild energies have been, well, bouncing around among our Force-sensitive individuals on Hoth. None of those individuals have Luke's strength or training, but he seems to be drawing energy through them somehow. Anyway, all this energy flow started to disrupt our operations, and lately, strange things have been appearing and disappearing around our base."

"We think--or rather, now we know, since Leia and I are here--the energy has broken through to other universes," Aithne said, taking up the explanation. "Even if it doesn't succeed in tearing up everything, we're afraid the disturbance it is causing will attract the attention of Vader and the Emperor. We've isolated Luke from the rest of the Force-sensitives by taking him off-planet, but the disruptions are still going on."

"One of our researchers managed to come up with a substance that might detoxify Luke, but the materials are so rare that we couldn't make enough to do the job," Leia went on. "We also need to treat the Force-sensitives back at the base, or Luke might suffer a relapse when he returns. The estimated requirement is about two-and-a-half liters; we were only able to synthesize 100 milliliters."

"Because of the cross-over effect, however," the redhead jumped in, "we thought there might be enough raw materials in some other universe to formulate a sufficient quantity of the detoxicant. The timing wasn't exactly planned, however. I was visiting Hoth when this all started, and Leia was explaining the situation to me when everything vanished. Next thing I knew I was in the park with you," she said, looking to Doyle.

"What were you doing in the park in the middle of the night?" Bodie whispered to his partner.

"Walking home from Beth's house," Doyle answered.

Aithne continued as though nothing had interrupted. "Leia must've been caught in the backwash, because she wasn't scheduled to come, either."

"Just what is this magic potion you've been carrying around?" Bodie asked, his curiosity getting the better of his patience.

The girl handed him the vial, which he carefully unstopped. "It's some kind of...alcohol, with certain organic impurities, combined with the unprocessed nutritional secretion of a bovine mammal," Aithne said as Bodie sniffed the concoction.

"Nutritional secretion of a bovine mammal sounds like 'milk' in English," Doyle said. "You had milk in your tea."

"May I taste some plain?" the redhead asked, and Doyle fetched a clean cup and poured it for her.

Suddenly a gust of chill air filled the room, leaving frost on the tea service and a dismayed look on Aithne's face. "It's starting," she whispered, then spoke up in response to the puzzled expressions of the men. "The dimensional disruption of your universe. That cold was a free sample of Hoth environment."

"Thanks," Bodie muttered, "but we've got enough of our own lousy weather."

"It will get worse," Leia said. "As long as Aithne and I are displaced, we act as focal points for these phenomena. In a few more hours, I'm sorry to say, your universe will slowly start to come apart."

"You don't care who you use, do you, Princess?" asked Bodie. "Just march right in to someone's world, take what you need, and to hell with them."

"You're wrong, Bodie," Leia said, her temper starting to rise. "We have no way of knowing whether or not the random energy flow would have affected your universe at this point in time if we weren't here. We do know, however, that if Luke's condition goes untreated much longer, everything--your universe, mine, the one around some other-dimensional corner--would begin to disintegrate. You, at least, have a chance to stop the process."

"How long have we got?" Doyle asked quietly.

"Three, four hours at the most," Aithne answered. "The other manifestations around Hoth Base lasted approximately that long."

"Then let's get moving. Taste the milk and see if it's the right 'nutritional secretion.'"

The girl did so, several times, then smiled. "This is it," she said.

"Great," Bodie said, beginning to bounce back from the scolding. "I've got a couple more cartons in the fridge."

"Janet?" Doyle asked, sotto voce. Bodie nodded, about to say something, but was interrupted by Aithne.

"Has this been treated in some way to kill microorganisms?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's been pasteurized," Bodie said. "It's heated until the germs are killed, then allowed to cool."

"Is there any way we can get untreated milk?" Aithne asked. "The process may also destroy some necessary element of the formula."

"Raw milk? Where are we going to find raw milk at this hour?" Bodie exclaimed.

"Find a cow," his partner suggested, only to receive a glare in return. Doyle ignored the killing look, then indicated the vial still in Bodie's hand. "Don't just stand there. Can you tell what kind of alcohol we're supposed to put in the milk?"

Bodie looked down at the vial, as though seeing it for the first time in months. He brought it to his nose and sniffed. "Smells like...I'm not sure. It's something familiar, but the milk must change it somehow." He put the vial to his lips, then withdrew it. "You did say it was safe for humans?" he asked Aithne.

"Yes," she said, "but go easy on it. That's our only sample."

Bodie nodded, then slowly took a sip. He replaced the stopper and started to laugh. "'S malt," he said. "Cowley's malt whiskey."

Doyle looked at him incredulously. "You're sure?"

Bodie held out the vial. "See for yourself."

Doyle took the tube and tasted the contents. He chuckled. "You're right," he told his partner. "Malt Scotch and milk."

"A waste of good Scotch," Bodie commented.

"Or, as Janet would tell you," Doyle said, "a waste of good milk."

"This mixture is not uncommon in your universe?" asked Leia.

"It's not common, either," Bodie said, "but the components aren't that hard to come by."

"Except at this time of night," Doyle commented, "or rather, this time of morning."

Bodie glanced at his watch. "Two o'clock. Only places I know that're open now aren't the kind

that carry Cowley's brand." Leia looked puzzled and he went on to explain. "Some of the laws our elected representatives have made tell us when we may and may not buy this 'alcohol with organic impurities.'"

"Like Massatucket," Aithne said, "at least, before the Shortage hit."

The princess nodded. "You do have a potential source of supply, however?" she said.

Bodie looked at Doyle, who answered, "Cowley. Our boss. Keeps a couple bottles around the house."

"Yeah," Bodie said, "but what're we gonna tell him when he wants to know why we want it?"

The thought of trying to explain the present situation to the head of CI5 was more than either of them could take. "We won't tell him," Doyle said.

"What?" Bodie exclaimed. "You're just gonna say, 'Excuse me, sir. Sorry to wake you up, sir, but may we have a bottle of your whiskey?' You know what that'll get you." He pantomimed a slash across the throat with his finger.

"I hadn't intended to wake him at all," Doyle replied with a grin, pulling a plastic card and a collection of wires from his jacket pocket. "I've still got my lockpick set from yesterday's drill."

"Think you can do it?" Bodie asked. "Cowley's a sly old dog, bound to have a couple tricks up his sleeve."

A small piece of blizzard appeared in the room, dumping its load of snow onto them when the wind that had been driving it suddenly ceased. The chunk of winter persisted for almost a minute, then disappeared as quickly as it came. The snow, however, remained, slowly melting into the rug, the furniture and their clothes.

"I don't think we have a choice," Doyle said, dashing to the kitchen with Bodie to get pans to scoop up the snow. "The longer we wait, the worse this is going to get."

"What about the milk?" Bodie asked, clearing away the icy crystals as best he could.

"I already told you," Doyle said. "Find a cow."

"That's what I was afraid of," Bodie said as he dumped a load of snow into the kitchen sink. Doyle piled his on top of it. They grabbed towels and headed back into the living room to finish mopping up. Leia took one of the cloths and began dabbing at the wet spots on the furniture, while Aithne took the now-soggy tea tray away.

"Time is running out," Leia observed.

"Yeah, we noticed," Bodie said. "What are the proportions on this potion of yours? How much stuff are we going to have to get to make enough?"

"Two to one, milk to alcohol," Aithne supplied, returning from the kitchen.

"A liter's a little more than a quart,"

added Doyle, "so in order to make two-and-a-half liters..." His eyes took on a distant look as he calculated in his head.

"Never mind the math," Bodie said. "One quart whiskey to two quarts milk. A little extra won't hurt."

"One quart of malt whiskey, coming up," Doyle said, heading for the door now that the clean-up was complete.

"Hey," Bodie said, "take Red here with you. If anything else comes popping through, I don't want it in my flat."

Doyle smiled. "Sure thing, mate. Come along, 'Red.'" Aithne grinned, then followed him to the door. "Be back in an hour."

"I guess you're coming with me, Your Highness," Bodie said.

"What are you going to do?" Leia asked.

"In the words of my partner, find a cow." He went into the kitchen again, dropping off the soaked towels. He came back into the living room with a milk carton in his hands. "Express Dairy," he read. "Victoria Road, South Ruislip, Middlesex." He looked up at her. "You're already wearing a jacket, so let's go."

If anyone had told Bodie he'd be spending the wee hours of one morning with Princess Leia looking for a cow, he would've been the first to laugh at the joke. Unfortunately, it was all too true.

It took half an hour of Bodie's best speeding to get to South Ruislip, and when they arrived, they found out the building on Victoria Road housed milk processors, not milk producers. Another fifteen minutes were spent looking for a likely farm.

Perhaps because the Force was with her, or because Bodie was too occupied with the mechanics of driving down narrow country lanes--whatever it was, Leia was the first to spot the sought-after livestock. "Is that a cow?" she asked Bodie, pointing at a large, dark shape next to the roadside fence.

Bodie braked quickly and spun the car about. As he neared the animal in question, he could see that it was indeed a cow. "Yes, Your Highness, that is a cow," he said. He parked the Capri off the road and grabbed the bucket he'd brought for the occasion. "You're going to have to come along," he said as he climbed out. "Someone's got to hold Bossy's head."

They went over the fence several feet away from the animal and approached her cautiously. She had been lying on the grass, but stood up quickly and moved away as the two came closer. "C'mon, Bossy, be a good girl now," Bodie muttered, trying to maneuver the beast into a corner of the pasture. That took more precious time, but they finally succeeded.

"It may be a good thing I'm wearing boots," Leia observed as they walked across the pasture. Bodie looked over to see a brief smile.

"You're one up on me there, Princess," he said,

scuffing his feet against the grass. "With any luck, we'll be through with this in just a bit."

The cow seemed docile enough with Leia standing at her head. Bodie placed the pail under the udder, then put his hands in his armpits for a minute.

"What are you doing now?" Leia asked.

"Getting my hands warm," Bodie replied. "How would you like cold hands on your--" The look that had flashed across her face was enough to make Hoth seem temperate, and Bodie concluded lamely, "--Well, you know."

He turned his attention to the cow, stroking her flanks a couple times, then moving down to the teats. The steady 'splish, splish, splish' of milk hitting the pail began.

"Were you raised on a farm?" Leia asked.

"No," Bodie replied.

"How is it you know how to do this?"

"When you're living off the land, and I've had my share of that in some places," Bodie said, recalling some hard times in the field as a mercenary, "you learn how to get food anywhere you can. I learned to milk goats first--lotta goats in Africa, not many cows--but the principle's the same: squeeze and pull." He looked to where she was standing. "I take it you've never done any milking before," he said.

"No," Leia said. "It's not a required subject in princess training." She smiled briefly again, then went on, "But it might be useful to know."

"If you come back here, I'm sure I can arrange some 'hands on' training," Bodie volunteered.

"Ugh!" Leia said. "Was that a word joke in your language? Or did the Force--"

"Yes," Bodie confessed, "that was a pun in English. I forgot you're hearing all this in translation."

"Hmf," the princess said stiffly, then relaxed. "And what does one do here when such a joke is made?" she asked.

"Groan, like you did."

"Ah," Leia said. "Our cultures have some similarity then."

Several minutes of steady milking had brought the level of milk almost halfway up the pail. Suddenly Bodie felt cold again and he glanced up to see something that looked like a snow-covered furry camel with horns curving alongside its head peering down at him from the other side of the cow. The creature disappeared as abruptly as it had appeared, but not before the cow tried to run away, nearly knocking over the bucket of milk.

"What was that?" Bodie asked the princess as he dragged the pail out of the panicky cow's path.

"What was what?"

Bodie described the strange apparition, and Leia promptly identified it as a tauntaun.

"We've managed to train some for riding," she explained. "They're the only animal that can survive on Hoth, it seems, and even they have to be sheltered during the worst weather." She shivered slightly, and Bodie didn't think it was the night air that caused it. "The disturbances are growing," she said. "We're running out of time."

Bodie checked the milk. "We've got more than enough here," he said. "Let's go." They headed back to the car, where Bodie funneled the milk into a half-gallon jug. There was a little bit left in the pail when he finished. "Want it?" he asked, offering Leia the bucket.

"No, thanks."

He rubbed the rim with his sleeve, then lifted the pail to his mouth, tipping it slightly. When he finished, he wiped the resulting milk mustache from his lips with the back of his hand. "Not bad," he commented, opening the door for Leia and handing her the jug to hold when she had seated herself, "but I'd rather sample what Doyle's bringing back."

He put the now-empty bucket on the floor of the back seat and then climbed into the driver's side and started the car. Without the necessity of locating a 'bovine mammal' inhibiting his speed, Bodie sent the silver Capri flying down the lanes and along the highway back into the city. With a certain pride in his driving skill, Bodie glanced over at his passenger, who seemed unimpressed by their rate of travel. Maybe bouncing around through hyperspace spoils you for ground transport, he thought.

In spite of the haste with which they returned, Doyle and Aithne were waiting for them back at the flat. "What took you so long, mate?" Doyle asked as he opened the door.

"You ever tried finding a cow in London?" Bodie retorted, carefully wiping his feet before entering. Leia did the same as she came in with the milk.

"You coulda tried the zoo," Doyle volunteered, only to receive a withering glare from his partner. "Aren't you going to ask us about our little expedition?" he went on, undaunted.

"You're back, and in one piece," Bodie said, taking the milk into the kitchen. "Cowley must not have been disturbed."

"Cowley wasn't disturbed," Doyle said, following him, "but we damn near died when a cubic foot of vacuum popped into existence--or non-existence, if you prefer--over Cowley's desk and started sucking up the paperwork."

"That's all that stuff's good for, you know," Bodie said, dumping the milk into one of the large pots that had been used for snow removal earlier, "sucking up."

"Clever, aren't we," Doyle said, handing him the bottle of whiskey he'd brought back. "I don't know whether or not I want to be there when Cowley finds one bottle missing from the case he just

bought, and the files from last week's work all over the floor."

"Suicide appeals to you that much, then," Bodie commented, stirring the mixture of Scotch and milk with a wooden spoon. Aithne stepped forward and held out her hand for the spoon, tasting the concoction. She frowned.

"Something's missing," she said, then took another sip from the spoon.

"Oh, no," groaned Bodie. Doyle echoed his sentiments.

"Wait a minute," the redhead said, trying to reassure them. "I think I remember now. There's a trace amount of disaccharide needed. The alcohol we're using lacks it, and therefore it must be added separately."

"Di--what?" Bodie asked.

"Disaccharide," Aithne repeated. "Made up of two monosaccharides."

"Why can't the Force speak English?" Bodie asked exasperatedly.

"How can you tell it's missing?" Doyle asked. "What should it taste like?"

"Mmm--sweeter, I'd say, but just a little," Aithne said.

"Sugar!" Doyle exclaimed, grabbing the bowl from the drainboard and bringing it over to the girl. "Try this. You had it in your tea."

Aithne dipped her finger into the sugar and tasted it. "Exactly right," she said, and began sprinkling the crystals onto the mixture as she stirred. She checked it again, added a pinch more sugar, and then smiled. "This is it, guys. Bottle it and we're ready to go."

They poured the liquid back into the milk jug and the whiskey bottle, both rinsed clean so as not to alter the proportions. The containers were sealed tightly and carried into the living room where Leia was waiting.

"How do you expect to get back, now that you've got what you need?" Doyle asked.

"Yeah," Bodie said, "all this cross-over stuff has been one-way, your place to ours."

"That's where your faith in the Force comes in," said Aithne, sitting down beside Leia.

"I knew there was a catch somewhere," Bodie muttered.

"You must want your universe back to normal," Leia explained, "and we must want to get back to our own universe."

"A couple pairs of ruby slippers'd come in handy right now," Doyle whispered to his partner.

Leia waited for him to finish, then went on. "The focus of the Force would then be away from

here, and any movement would be back to our universe."

"Theoretically," Aithne chipped in. "It's never been done before, but then, we've never needed to, either."

"Well, let's not just stand around talking about it," Bodie said, seating himself. "Let's get to it."

The princess took Aithne's hand and both of them closed their eyes and relaxed. Doyle sat down and followed suit. Bodie closed his eyes, but had difficulty concentrating on what he wanted. If I put my universe 'back to normal,' will I remember any of this? he wondered. What if I wake up tomorrow with smelly shoes and dirty dishes and don't know why? A quiet hum seemed to echo within him, and he thought he heard Cowley's Lowland Scots burr in his head saying, "C'mon, Bodie. Use your head. I know you're not stupid. You wouldn't have lived this long if you were, and you certainly wouldn't be on my squad."

The hum increased in volume until it was a dull roar, and again there was the biting smell of ozone in his nose as his middle ear told him he was falling--a fact confirmed by the impact of his seat with a hard surface. He opened his eyes, then quickly shut them. Oh, what the hell, he told himself, it's mad to believe Princess Leia popped into my bedroom, so how could it be worse if I pop onto the Millennium Falcon?

Bodie slowly opened his eyes and looked around and found his partner doing the same thing. "I don't believe it, either, mate," Bodie said, "and I'm not even going to try to understand it." Doyle just nodded and was about to try to stand up when he realized he was holding one of the containers of detoxicant. He pointed to the jug in Bodie's hands.

"I think we came with the merchandise," he said.

Just then Aithne and Leia came around. "Oh, no," Aithne said when she saw the men. "We should've taken the formula from you first."

Doyle handed her the bottle and Bodie passed the jug to Leia. "Okay," Bodie said, "let's go back the way we came."

Before they could even get to the eyes-shut stage, the roar of a Wookiee scattered any concentration they could have mustered. Bodie and Doyle reflexively rolled out of the charging Wookiee's path and assumed positions for unarmed combat. Aithne, however, began barking and growling back at Chewbacca--at least, Bodie thought it was Chewbacca. Who else is it gonna be?--and the creature stopped in its tracks and listened.

As Aithne finished explaining the situation to Chewbacca, Leia stood up and took one container of the detoxicant. "I've got to give this to Luke," she said, heading back to where Bodie assumed the crew's quarters were located.

The Wookiee stared at the two men, but was interrupted in his scrutiny by a yell from the cockpit. "Hey, fuzball! I thought I told you to

crank up that topside gun. I'm not gonna be no sittin' duck for those TIE's on the sensors."

Chewbacca howled something and went forward. Evidently he relieved the pilot, who came stalking back to where Doyle, Bodie and Aithne were standing.

It was Han Solo who greeted the girl with, "Hi, Red," and then gave the men a onceover. "These your friends?" he asked.

"You might say that," she replied. "They helped us with the detoxicant, then got tangled up in the Force when we were trying to get back."

"Yeah, well, I know what getting 'tangled up in the Force' can do to a guy's life," Han said, "but we ain't got time to chat about it. Sensors show a TIE patrol headed this way. With Luke still sick, I can't go back to Hoth, and there's nowhere else to run."

"I think I can help," Bodie said. "Show me how your guns work and I'll take care of the fighters."

"Think so, huh?" Han was plainly skeptical. "What about you?" He turned to Doyle. "You a hotshot, too?"

"Maybe," Doyle said. "What've you got to lose?"

"You got a point," Han conceded. "Come with me."

The gunports were exactly as the movie had shown, and it wasn't long before the two CI5 agents had the hang of things.

"It's just like the STAR WARS game down at the arcade," Bodie commented to his partner when Solo returned to the cockpit.

Doyle's voice came back on the headset. "To quote a certain Corellian, 'don't get cocky, kid.' I've got targets on my screen now."

Just then a couple TIEs came into view on Bodie's screen as well and he turned his attention to knocking them out. He managed to bull's-eye one in the first few seconds of the engagement, but the task suddenly became more difficult as the Falcon began evasive maneuvers.

He heard Doyle mutter, "Gotcha," into the com-link, and he knew he and his partner were even. He tried to settle down to the job at hand, but nothing seemed to go right. He could feel his frustration rising as the fighters swarmed around them, dodging his laser bolts and landing a few hits of their own.

"Hey, I thought you guys were supposed to be crack shots," Han shouted from the cockpit. A wounded TIE came spinning out of control alongside the freighter, then exploded in a blaze of sparks. Doyle had scored again.

"Relax, Bodie," came Cowley's voice again, and Bodie wiggled the headset to try to clear the disturbance. "Cool that hot head of yours and your form'll come back." The gunport faded from around him and he was back in Africa, on watch outside the small village his unit was based in. He'd found a good tree to hide in, and the enemy seemed to walk

right into his fire. The starlit darkness of the African night was slowly replaced by the stars outside the Falcon and another Imperial fighter blew up in front of him.

"One more like that and we're free and clear," Solo announced, plunging the ship into a tight curve to bring the last TIE back into range. The little fighter had probably decided discretion was indeed the better part of valor and had turned tail to report the encounter to its parent ship. For the continued safety of the nearby rebel base, however, that could not be allowed.

As the Falcon approached, the TIE went into a series of crazy turns and spins, but to no avail. Bodie felt the strange calm flow through him again and he casually loosed a shot, hardly surprised when it struck the fighter and blasted it to bits.

He removed the headset and climbed back into the lounge area, his partner joining him there. "I, uh, had the strangest feeling for a while," Doyle said. "As though Cowley were standing in back of me, telling me when and where to shoot."

"Me too, mate," Bodie said. "I thought there must be something wrong with the comset, but I remembered hearing him when we were back in my flat."

"It's the Force," came a young voice from the corridor. They looked up to see Luke Skywalker walking toward them slowly, Leia at his side, steadying him.

"I thought the Force sounded like Sir Alec Guinness," Bodie said. "You know, old Obi-wan Kenobi."

Luke smiled weakly. "The Force speaks in many voices, but always with authority." Bodie and Doyle looked at each other and laughed. The young man from Tatooine went on, softly, "I've always wondered who it sounds like to Han." Even Leia smiled at that as she helped him take a seat next to the holochess table.

"I've told Luke the part you played in making the detoxicant," Leia said.

"And your help with the TIE fighters just now was invaluable as well," Aithne added.

"I don't know how we can thank you," Luke said, "except by sending you home again."

The CI5 agents looked at each other. "That'll do," Doyle said, and Bodie nodded agreement.

Chewbacca padded back from the cockpit, quietly this time, and stood between Luke and Aithne. The young Jedi took one massive paw in one hand and reached out for Leia's with the other. The princess took Bodie's hand, and the Wookiee linked up with Aithne, who shyly accepted Doyle's hand. That left a break between the two men. Doyle winked at Bodie and held out his hand. Bodie took it with a grin. The rude whispers that flew around CI5 headquarters never bothered the two; besides, none of the other agents were there to see, anyway.

"Much as we can use trained fighters like you in the Alliance," Luke said, "you don't really

belong here. Concentrate on where you want to be. Visualize it in as complete detail as you can. We will be pushing you in that direction."

Obediently, Bodie began to picture his flat, his bedroom, where this incredible adventure had begun. The bed was beginning to look terribly inviting.

The quiet hum he'd heard on the trip out surrounded him again. Bodie felt himself spiraling down, floating like a feather on the wind. Home. In bed. Safe. That's where he was going. Very softly, on the extreme edge of his awareness, he heard Cowley's voice say, "Very good, Bodie. I knew you could do it." Nothing to it, sir, he wanted to say, but he lacked the energy for even that much. He was asleep.

The soft light of early morning was sneaking into his awareness and he opened his eyes slowly. The hairline crack on the ceiling followed its familiar pattern. He looked around himself, stretching languorously and yawning. Everything seemed unchanged.

The activities of the night before faded into uncertainty. Had Princess Leia really materialized in his room? And had he wound up in a STAR WARS universe with Doyle and helped save the Rebel Alliance? "No," he announced to himself. "It was just a dream."

From the floor at the end of his bed, Doyle's voice said, "That was no dream, mate." Bodie crawled to the edge of the bed and looked down at his partner. "I certainly didn't fall asleep here last night," Doyle continued by way of explanation.

"It was real, then," Bodie said, unwilling to accept the fantastic series of events, but unable to account for them any other way.

"As real as anything else," Doyle said, sitting up.

"It's incredible," Bodie said.

"Yeah," his partner agreed, "and the worst part is that we can never tell anyone."

"Not unless you fancy life in a rubber room," Bodie said. There was silence for a moment as the two of them contemplated the possibilities.

A light dawned in Doyle's eyes and he turned to Bodie. "I know one person we could tell," he said, grinning.

"Shirley!" Bodie exclaimed, arriving at the same conclusion. "She'll love it."

"What time is it?" Doyle asked.

"A little before seven."

"They're an hour ahead of us in Germany," Doyle calculated. "She should be at work in a few minutes."

Bodie got up and went into the kitchen, reappearing shortly with two cups of coffee. He began dialing the access codes and phone number that would connect them with the one person they felt would understand, being a rabid STAR WARS fan herself, and the source of most of their own information about the film.

When the phone was answered with "DCSLOG Word Processing. This line is not secure," Bodie asked to speak with Shirley Alden. Doyle got on the living room extension, and when Shirley was on the line, they took turns explaining the wild and crazy affair of the night before.

The girl listened patiently, interrupting only briefly to ask a question or two to clarify some detail. When the two finally wound down, however, her tone changed.

"You know, guys," she said, "you surprise me. I honestly didn't think you had it in you. That was very imaginative. But if you truly expect me to believe that everything you just described actually happened, you're gonna have to find another day besides April Fool's Day to tell me about it."

She rang off abruptly and the two men just looked at each other. "I never thought of that," Doyle said, checking the date indicator on his watch.

"It doesn't change what happened," Bodie said. "We tried to tell her."

"Yeah," Doyle agreed. "Let's just see if that explanation works when Cowley wants to know why he's missing a bottle of his precious malt whiskey."

"I don't think it will," Bodie said.

"Neither do I."


"Is this what it's like to be an unsung hero?" Bodie asked, opening the door for his partner.

"With your voice, mate," Doyle said, sauntering downstairs, "maybe it's a good thing." He ducked the car keys hurled at his head, picking them up at the foot of the stairs and handing them back to their owner.

The trip to CI5 headquarters was uneventful, and the rest of the day was, too. That was a rare occurrence, and Bodie looked forward to celebrating it with someone--Janet, perhaps, or maybe Anne. Then again, he hadn't seen Sara in a while...*



Through Human Eyes



The summer skies were dark with rain
The ocean sang a storm's refrain
I wished that I were with the sea
The night the sea-child came to me

**A dying man beneath my hands...
An alien looked up at me.**

I tried to teach him of the land
I wondered if he'd understand
Could he help, as we had asked?
Or did we try too much, too fast?

**A silent man touched hands to mine
The alien's first word was "yes."**

Unprepared, we sent him out
And risked more than we knew about
Not ocean deeps, for he belonged
But subtle lies to lead him on...

**Oh yes, we taught him well of man.
"I understand--and you are wrong!"**

He almost died in our defense
To save an earth that wasn't his
I thought he'd gone forever, then
We'd never know what he had been--

**I looked out on an empty sea...
An alien came back again.**

We let him go. I watched him leave.
He'd touched my tears, but he was free.
I stood alone on ocean sands...
A human form rose from the sea.

**And then he came, and touched my hand--
An alien smiled back at me.**

Dian Hardison

INITIATION RIGHTS

PAT NUSSMAN

"You're a what, flyboy?"

"You heard me, Your Worship," Han Solo snapped. Gathering his old arrogance around him like a protective shield, he directed a smoldering gaze at the Alderaani princess.

Leia Organa tapped one foot impatiently, her shapely form regrettably unsung by the Corellian's fiery gaze. "Han, I asked you a question!"

A low chuckle to his right turned Han's gaze from the clearly unintimidated princess to the former Tatooine farmboy. At least the kid faked out easily...

Skywalker leaned casually against a wall, grinning from ear to ear. Han's best belligerent glare caused no diminishment to his good humor. "That's all right, Han," Luke said soothingly, his blue eyes dancing with laughter. "We understand."

Han felt remarkably unsoothed. **Correction**, Han thought moodily, **the kid had been easy to fake out**. Han directed vengeful thoughts toward old man Kenobi and the little green creep Luke had told him about. The kid'd been much easier to handle before training in that swamphole.

"Well, I don't understand." Annoyance flared across the Princess Organa's delicate features. "In fact, I don't believe it." The glance she swept over the length of the Corellian's form spoke volumes. A moment passed in silence as she drummed her fingertips against one slim leg. "You're joking?" she finally asked hopefully. A stifled laugh erupted from Luke's corner of the room.

Han shook his head. "Is it so hard to believe?" A plaintive note entered his voice.

"Yes!" Again, she swept a glance over his lean form, an incredulous expression in the deep brown eyes. "The way you look, the way you dress, the way you act! Sweet Deherhi, everyone just assumed..."

Han folded his arms stubbornly. "Then they assumed wrong, Your Holiness. I do not bed ten women every night, I haven't made the Imperial Book of Galactic Records for lifetime scores, and ladies don't fling themselves over my landing ramp when the Falcon touches down. I'm--" He stopped, unable to utter the fatal word again.

"A virgin," Luke supplied helpfully.

"Thanks, kid," Han said tightly. He felt less than grateful.

"Seems to me I should be calling you that, Han." Luke's smile widened, his enjoyment of the situation painfully obvious.

Han turned his back pointedly on the young Jedi. "Listen, Your Holiness," he said harshly, "I don't know what I've done to give folks the impression..."

The princess halted him with a single glance. "Right," she replied dryly. A pregnant pause ensued, finally broken by Leia. "Just tell me one thing."

Han shifted his feet nervously. "Yeah, what?"

"Why?"

The smuggler examined his boots with minute care. "I took a vow." His voice sunk toward inaudibility.

"A vow?" Leia repeated sharply. "What kind of vow? You mean like a monk?"

Luke glanced down at his brown robes and bit back another smile.

"Not that kind of monk," Han said furiously. "I ain't no Jedi."

"Obviously not, Han." The infuriating grin popped out to mar his friend's countenance. "We don't take that kind of vow. If we did," he added simply, "I wouldn't have joined."

Leia ignored her brother's levity. "A monk." Disbelief vibrated through her voice. She examined Han as though he had suddenly grown a second head.

"Was," he said tightly. **Might as well get it all out at once, damnit!** "The Imps destroyed the Corelli order. I was the only one to get out. Since the Imps kept a lookout for survivors, I became a smuggler--figured that was the one thing the Imps would never suspect a monk of being."

"But you still must keep your vows?" Leia persisted.

"I don't have to," he replied repressively. "Since the monastery's gone, I can hardly renew my vows every five standards, like the Rule says. Besides," he hunched his shoulders, "I don't believe in that mumbo-jumbo anymore."

"Then," Luke said meditatively, "you've been released from your, er, vow for some time?"

"That's right, kid." Han's eyes said, **One more word and you're creamed Jedi**, but no one seemed interested in receiving the message.

"Then what's keeping you back, flyboy?"

Han remained stubbornly silent, trying to pretend to himself that this whole situation was a figment of his fevered imagination.

Leia's boot resumed its impatient rhythm, sounding only too real. "Well, flyboy?"

Han's temper flared, pumping enough adrenalin into his system to fuel his reply. Almost. "Well, what if you were me, Your Worship? Would you go waltzing up to some lady and tell her you'd never--you didn't--I mean--" Han's adrenalin and courage failed him at one and the same time.

"What he's trying to say, Leia," Luke's voice trembled on the edge of some emotion that Han preferred not to identify, "is that he doesn't know what to do. Or how to do it."

Leia's mouth dropped open. A fine crimson flush flooded Han's face. Well, why is she so surprised? I mean, if a guy is a vir--a monk, it stands to reason he wouldn't know--he couldn't--Hell, he couldn't even say it to himself!

Luke crossed the room in a few smooth, confident strides, clasp one arm fraternally around Han's shoulder. "Tell you what, Han," he said

kindly, "I know a pleasure house near here with some real nice girls. I'll take you right over and fix you up."

Han felt his color deepen. In contrast, Leia Organa's face cleared, a hint of speculation entering her dark eyes.

"No, Luke." She smiled. Her foot ceased its impatient rhythm.

Luke raised a questioning eyebrow. "No? But, Leia, it's a perfect solution."

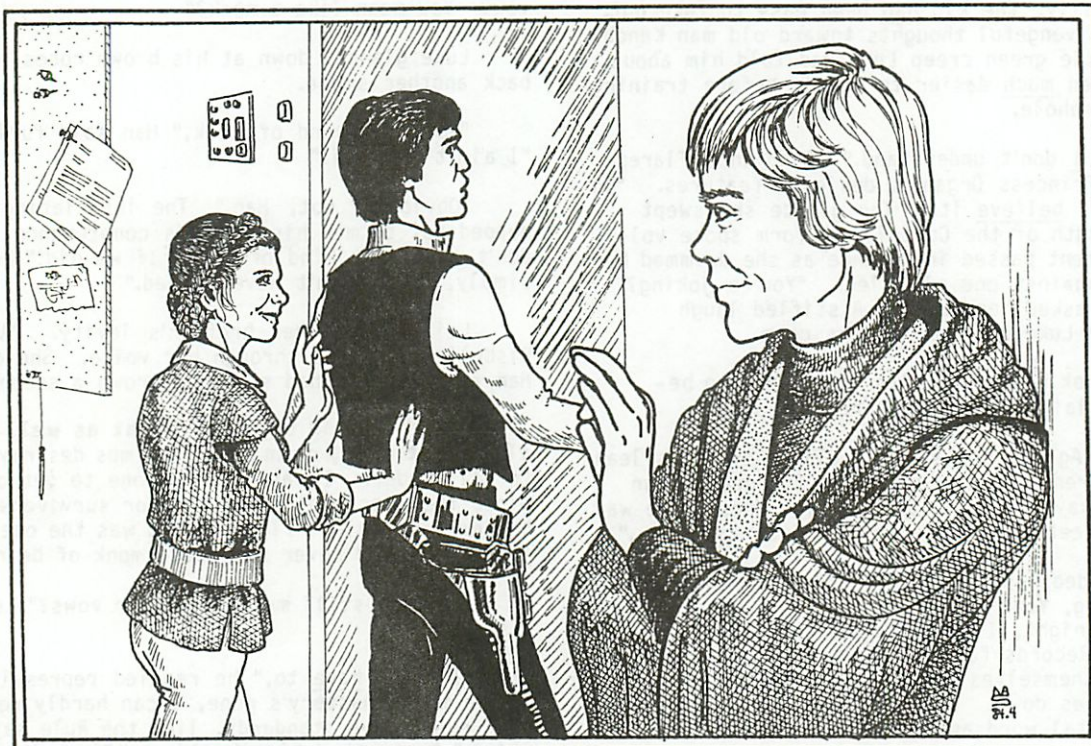
She glided over to them, gently removing Luke's arm from Han's shoulder. "No, Luke. That would entail turning poor Han over to strangers."

Luke's eyebrow climbed higher.

"No, I know they're not strangers to you, Luke, but they are to Han." She shook her head. "I couldn't leave Han to strangers." She slipped her hand through his arm, tugging him gently through the door with all the inevitability of an Implacable Force.

"Besides," she turned at the door, winking at the grinning Luke Skywalker, "there's an old Alderaani saying, 'If you want it done right--'" She planted one small hand firmly in the small of Han's back, pushing him out the door.

"--Do it yourself." ✱



OF AND RIGHTEOUSNESS, OTHER YOUTHFUL FOLLIES

SUSAN CRITES

"Han?" Luke poked his head cautiously around the edge of the door opening, as though not wanting to leave the darkened hallway of the docked Millennium Falcon until he was certain of his welcome.

To Luke's evident surprise, Han greeted him with an embarrassed, "C'mon in, kid," and sat up in the bunk. Swinging his long legs over the edge, he waved an invitation for his visitor to sit on Chewie's empty bunk, an object which took up more than half of the cramped sleeping quarters grandiosely termed 'the captain's cabin.'

Complying, Luke seemed to be sorting through various opening lines, as though he'd been practicing them on his way over to the ship berthing station at the rebel outpost.

Han knew that the last thing Luke would have expected was this suggestion of contrition, after the way he had stormed out of Leia's strategy session, and just because she'd innocently suggested he go on an undercover mission disguised as a monk! Of all the scruples he was wildly unlikely to exhibit, Han knew religious ones would have topped the list in Luke's estimation.

Han clapped his hands over his knees and leaned forward, gazing earnestly at Luke. "I want to... apologize...for overreacting back there. I know you two didn't mean any harm, and I guess I didn't make too much sense, yellin' like a Skrii in heat." He suddenly noticed a frayed spot on the seam of his pants by his left knee, and began to pluck at it as he said, "Uh, you won't mind tellin' Her Worshipfulness that for me when you go back over, will ya?"

"Sure, I'll tell her, Han," Luke promised. "We're both sorry for upsetting you, even though we don't know why..." He trailed off, as though waiting for Han to pick up the hint and offer a reasonable explanation of his behavior. None was forthcoming. "I mean...you know...we thought it was a good, safe plan--"

"Well, it's not!" snapped Han, his head jerking up. At Luke's instant return to a look of uncomprehending dismay, he relented. "Look, kid, I know you didn't get out to the bright lights much before you took up with the rebellion, but even back there in Dust City you must have heard about the bad things that happen when people dress up like monks." Luke looked skeptical, and Han frowned, but continued doggedly, "Now, you know I'm not superstitious--but there are some things a guy can't explain in this ol' galaxy, and the 'monk's robe curse' is one of them. I'm not going to wear one, not for any reason, and I'm not going anywhere with anyone who does, so--"

"Not superstitious, huh, Han?" Luke stood up and paced the small cubicle. "Then why do you believe this...this crazy idea about bad luck coming when you borrow a monk's outfit?"

"Not bad luck--disaster," Han said evenly, his eyes desperately solemn. "Look--remember when we first met, and ol' Kenobi was teaching you your Force stuff?"

Luke nodded stiffly, leaning aggressively against the wall and looking as if he'd like to be kicking it full of holes.

"I didn't believe in the Force then; thought it was just another old spacer's tale. But I believe in it now, because I've seen it in action." He paused for emphasis, but, fearing the natural question that would follow, rushed on as Luke's mouth opened. "It's the same with the 'monk's robe curse.' I mean it--it's out of the question because it's too dangerous. If you really care about...your rebellion, you won't try this one."

Luke's lips thinned. "Suit yourself." He turned to duck out the hatchway.

"Kid!" Han rose to follow, reaching out after his friend. The beseeching hand dropped as soon as Han saw its pleading posture. After clearing his throat, he said with all the dignity he could, "Look, you come up with something else instead, something I can do, and...and I'll do it for nothin'. Honest."

"You'd volunteer to do anything else, rather than go the easy way, dressed as a monk?"

"I said so, didn't I?" demanded Han, chin out-thrust. "But nobody else uses the masquerade, either. That's the condition. Do we have a deal?"

"Well, yeah, as far as I'm concerned," Luke replied slowly, as though still troubled by a nagging sense that something was being glossed over. "I'll have to convince Leia to think up something new--she really liked this plan, Han, because she said nobody dresses up as a monk and so..."

"There's a reason," Han said heavily, "and it's not just piety."

"Okay, then, Han...whatever you say. I'll go talk to Leia now, okay?"

As the younger man left, still shaking his head in confusion, Han sank back down in his bunk. "Maybe I shoulda explained the real reason," he murmured to himself. It might have helped dispel the dark mists of memory that were rising up unbidden in his mind. But he wasn't even sure he could bring himself to explain, or make it come out right if he did--not that there had ever been anything right about the whole sorry mess...

Somewhere in his shirt and junk drawer, he recalled, there was a partially full bottle. A moment's search brought the cloudy container to light, and Han took several long swallows from it before returning to spread full length on the bunk. He knew from bitter experience that some memories, once stirred up, could not be forced back into the oblivion of the past, could only be muted with alcohol's temporary amnesia. If he killed the bottle quickly, he could possibly blot out most of it... He laughed bitterly. Blot it out? How, when he'd lived it so many times he even knew, or thought he knew, what must have happened even when he wasn't there. Each scene, as bright as the day he first saw it, or imagined it, began playing in his mind.

Han swallowed another drink...

* * *

"Drink up, the world's about to end!" Gif laughed, and followed his own advice. In the process of swinging his mug to his lips, he sloshed a

frothy wave of bheer into an arc intersecting with the tabletop.

Han grimaced as the bheer came perilously close to soaking the sleeve of his best dress uniform. "Watch it, Gif! I can't pay for cleaning twice in a week, and go out drinking, too."

"Bheer won't show on deep blue," Gif assured him.

"I don't give a damn if you can see it or not. You know what this local brew smells like when you let it sit! I can just see the Highcaptain's face at inspection if I turn up smelling like I spent a night on the tiles." Gif made soothing sounds of agreement and began blotting at the spill with napkins and his handkerchief. "Dumb idea, going out in dress blues anyway," Han continued. "All that talk about surprise inspections at any time is probably just that--talk. I should know better than to listen to stupid rumors like that."

"No, I heard it too, from a Winger, even. And you know what else I heard?" Gif leaned forward, the light of having a secret to share glittering in his eyes. "The reason curfew suddenly got lifted, even though the Imperial Inspectors are still here, is because they're figuring to make a really major bust. Some big-time smuggler or pirate or something is making a drop--or was it a pickup?--anyway, it has to do with controlled substances and contraband eyestones!"

"They oughta land heavy on guys like that," Han agreed absently, signaling the floor server for another round. "But I heard the sudden crackdown before the arrival of the double-I men was planned so that the Fan Nebula would get shut down, leaving this the only cabaret in town."

"That sounds about like how things go around here," nodded Gif, trying to sound wise in the ways of this and many other worlds. "Here at the Golden Eye, a few details that happen to be highly illegal get quietly cleaned up--but over at the Fan Nebula--a place just coincidentally owned by a guy Big Jom doesn't like--the crooked gambling wheel is 'suddenly' discovered and the whole outfit gets closed down, 'criminal proceedings to follow.'" He snorted. "A little funny how the authorities never discovered it before, when so many unwary enlisted personnel like ourselves were losing our hard-earned pay--"

Much to Han's relief, Gif shut up as the server drew near with their drinks. He liked Gif, but thought he talked too much, and a lot of it bordered on sedition. Sure, the Fleet wasn't perfect, the Empire wasn't perfect, this solitary town on a crummy mining planet wasn't perfect...so what was?

"Place is filling up," Han observed, "and the evening has barely started. Gonna get really wild in here tonight, I bet."

"It's because we've all been cooped up from curfew so long, and because it's nice out for a change. When that warm wind comes on here, everybody gets crazy."

"I'm gonna get crazy," Han said with a straight face, "tryin' to have fun and not get my dress blues dirty." Gif snorted into his mug,

attempting to stifle a laugh, then excused himself to head for the washroom.

As Han idly watched him cross the mirrored room, he noticed a tall man standing in the doorway, backlit by the bright rays of the setting sun. After an instant's pause, no doubt to scan the crowd inside--checking for danger? or a chance of profit, Han wondered--the stranger entered with an easy stride, heading straight for the bar.

There's something about this guy, Han thought, then dismissed the twinge of suspicion. It probably came from nothing more than the fact that the man was a stranger; strangers were uncommon in Jewelsport, but not unheard of. Judging from the man's dress--unadorned workingstyle pants of a dark hue, shirt and boots set off in their austerity only by a distinctive high-collared jacket--he was a free spacer. Probably needed a restock of something, something he couldn't put off until he got to a big port where open market competition helped keep prices down.

Gif reentered the barroom. As he began to thread his way back to the table, he was stopped by the stranger and they exchanged a few words. Han's interest sharpened again and he tried to steal a clearer look at the man's features as he too entered the table-strewn area, more or less following Gif's path. But he passed Han without looking down, heading for a darkened corner booth. Han couldn't turn to stare after him without looking conspicuous, so he settled for watching the receding reflection of the stranger in the mirrored walls. Unfortunately--perhaps purposely--the man's high collar and long red hair effectively disguised his face.

"What did that guy want?" Han asked Gif, trying not to sound too curious.

"Wanted to know when the show started." Gif shrugged. "I told him 'when it started.'"

Han smiled crookedly in acknowledgment. "It's a religious question."

"Huh?"

"God only knows."

Gif laughed and cuffed his friend. "I thought you were talking about the second show, the one people say was responsible for curfew in the first place."

Han's forehead creased. "What are you talkin' about? Curfew was because of the stuff going on at the Fan, and the riot it finally caused. It wasn't anything happening here."

"It was because of the 'monk's robe curse,' get it?" Gif's laugh revealed a note of strain. "You did know they've got a late show here with," his eyebrows arched suggestively, "lots of action?"

"With a monk?" Han was not, but his own admission, a deeply religious man, but he was shocked all the same.

"Why do you think I wanted to come here tonight? If it's true, I want to see it before they close it down." Gif peered into Han's face with bleary mock-concern, already beginning to show the

effects of the large quantity of bheer he'd consumed in the relatively short time they'd been there. "Say, you aren't...you know, going to go all pure on me, are you?" Gif giggled. "Thought you were the guy nothing could flap."

"Bend it, Gif," Han retorted. "I'm not flapped...I just didn't...look. It's Big Jom's planet, not mine. If the management has no worries, it doesn't bother me one way or the other."

Placatingly, Gif told Han a new joke he'd heard. It was typically long, dull, and pointless. Han nodded and pretended to listen, but his attention was drawn away by the entrance of a new group. He noticed that everyone watched them, though everyone also pretended not to. Like Gif, everyone kept on with their conversations, but sat up a little straighter and smiled more cheerfully.

Big Jom and his party--predictably--the Imperial Inspectors, several of the highest ranked officers at the Fleet base on the planet and two enlisted men acting as security escorts--made their way to the large table nearest the stage, placed discreetly against the wall. Locals would sooner pitch tens in the cemetery grounds than sit at that table uninvited.

Jewelsport existed to support the eyestone mine and Big Jom owned the mine. Rather, he owned the operations lease granted by the Imperial government, in exchange for political favors darkly guessed at in very private conversations.

Owning the lease meant he owned the town; even those who did not work for him personally were supported by him indirectly through his employees, the miners. The starbase personnel, clear up the base commander, understood quite well that, in terms of Imperial favor, Big Jom's possession of the mine contract meant he outranked them; simply lacked the detail of a high-ranking title. The title he did hold was a matter of courtesy. He was nominal head of the local volunteer reserves, a post which required no actual expenditure of effort. Because the title had come automatically with his mining lease, Big Jom didn't value it.

Like all men who have everything, Big Jom wanted more. When he heard of the Empire's intensive efforts to capture the notorious smuggler/pirate who was getting rich by stealing his eyestones, Jom had quickly offered to turn all his resources toward the rogue's capture. On top of all his money, power, and prestige, Jom thought he would enjoy a little glory.

"Nothing happens in this town that I don't hear about. Nothing," he assured his 'guests.' "I have sources of information everywhere. You'd be surprised." The Imperial Inspectors were gravely going about their business, ostensibly inspecting the mine, the starbase, and the now defunct Fan Nebula, while waiting for the word to trickle back to Big Jom that would enable them to fulfill their primary mission.

After the group was well settled, Han rose, stretching unobtrusively. "Get another round while

I'm gone if you get the chance," he instructed Gif, and headed for the hallway that led to his goal. As he walked by the side door that led into the alley, it opened. Han forgot how to move between one step and the next, amazed at the identity of the woman entering.

The lady, richly dressed in blue so deep it looked black in the dim light, was Rozmarik, Big Jom's wife. Han couldn't imagine why she hadn't come in style with the others; a style that suited her above all the rest of them. Why should she be sneaking in late through the side door, like a chorus girl who had overslept and somehow hoped her late arrival would go unnoticed? "Ma'am?" Han managed to say, "is anything wrong?" He searched her pale face for any sign of trouble. The faint lines about her mouth and brow. Had they been there before?

"Oh, no, thank you," she murmured, at the same time studying Han's face with rapid glances. "I presume my husband is here already, Mister...I do know you? Mr. Solo, isn't it?"

"Uh, yes, ma'am, Han Solo," he replied, hating himself because he suspected he might be blushing. "I was your escort...I mean, escort for you and your husband one night."

"Of course--and I remember, we had such a nice talk!" Rozmarik smiled, making pleasant lines appear that hid the others, the lines that worried Han. "I would have liked to have had you as our escort again sometime, but...well, you understand, Jom wouldn't want to use the same men over and over, and seem to be playing favorites."

Han answered her smile, willing to go along with any gentle fantasy she wanted to believe, such as the fairness of the man she was married to.

"I'd better not stand out here too long. Jom will be expecting me. I told him I'd be right along when they left the house, and the cab seemed to take a little longer than usual..."

"Surely." Han bowed. He hesitated, swallowed, then said, "It was nice seeing you again, if only for a moment. Have a pleasant evening." He hoped, as he turned away, that he hadn't said the wrong things, or seemed too forward. It was all too silly for words, anyway; feeling the way he did about a married--married, dammit, unhappily or not--woman who had plainly thought of him only as a nice young man who had once performed a service for her husband. Course, he thought, she isn't that much older than I am. And she is still beautiful, even though she's so tired-looking. Regal, that's it. Like the sad queen in the story Mom used to read to me when I was small.

Rozmarik paused in the doorway leading to the main show room and pretended to arrange her delicate shoulder wrap. In actuality she was steeling herself for an evening spent in the company of her husband and his guests. As her gaze fell on him, she felt the old familiar hatred begin to rise, like a bubble of steam moving sluggishly beneath the surface of not yet molten lava. She staunch it easily through long practice, fixed her smile in place, and walked to their table.

"Sorry, darlin', that I'm late," she whispered, giving each of the guests a mere polite glance before turning a devoted expression to her husband.

If he noticed, he gave no sign. The stranger in the corner, a mere silhouette against the dim reflections coming off the mirrored walls, seemed to have captured his attention. Rozmarik saw that Big Jom knew every face in town, and an unknown could mean trouble even in normal times. Now, with all this trouble brewing-- Wait and see, she counseled herself. If he's the man Jom's looking for, you'll see him make his move. Too, she knew Jom would be very sure before acting. If this stranger wasn't the smuggler, pirate, whatever, Jom would just look foolish pointing him out for arrest. And, she knew, for Big Jom the worst thing to do, ever, was to appear uncertain, or to jump a hunch and come up wrong. Control of himself and everything around him, that was the key to his success. If he ever lost that control, she knew, it would be the beginning of his end.

The houselights damped to near nothingness, leaving only the stage illuminated, and the patrons began to whoop and stamp their feet. Under cover of the crowd's noise, Rozmarik dared to order a double-strength Windflower from the server who had materialized at her side almost instantly after she had taken her seat. Jom didn't like her to drink heavily; not in public, anyway. In public she was supposed to play the part of a contented and very happily married lady of leisure.

She wondered sometimes why he cared what people thought of him once he had them under his control. After all, he'd quickly ceased to care what she thought of him, once they were legally joined. If only she had listened to the people who tried to warn her...but no, she'd been taken in by the glamor of his lifestyle, and his portrayal of a decent and honorable, but very lonely man. He had more facets than the ostentatious eyestones he wore constantly, and none of his public faces were any more real than the brilliant patterns of color and light a well-cut eyestone made you see.

Liri, the cabaret's star attraction, glided onto the stage to tumultuous applause. She threw a sparkling smile to the room and the musicians started into a flashy song of youthful abandon with an undercurrent of implied physical promise hammered out by the percussion. Rozmarik leaned back in her cushioned chair, so as not to intrude into the men's awareness, wearing an expression of amused indulgence for anyone who might care to look. Certainly her husband and his guests wouldn't. They were staring at Liri with undisguised lust, the Imperial visitors occasionally shooting admiring glances at Big Jom. He'd obviously told them how his plans for the young performer's conquest were progressing. Oddly enough, Rozmarik felt no dismay at the realization that these people knew her husband wanted--indeed, would spare no effort to obtain--another woman. Her sole reaction was pity for the young singer, who looked to be barely out of her girlhood.

Would she listen, if I warned her? Rozmarik wondered. If I told her how bright and full of promise my life was, before I met Jom? She noticed the server coming back, finished her drink quickly, and ordered another one. In the back of her mind warned her she was taking a risk; the last time she had let herself get drunk enough to forget to be

afraid of Jom he had spelled out her options with vicious clarity. With no family to speak of, no personal resources or friends who would risk Jom's displeasure to help her, she would literally starve in the streets. Not that he would permit her to disgrace him that way--he'd said he'd see her dead first. So she'd tried to oblige him...and had awakened in the hospital with him at her side, feigning deep concern until they were left alone.

"Try it again," he'd said, "and I'll have you committed for life. I understand life can seem like a long, long time in one of those places--and they know how to guard against suicide attempts."

The song ended and Jom bayed his appreciation with the rest of the crowd, jolting Rozmarik out of her recollections. She drew slightly away from his flailing elbow, and wondered again why he had insisted she come tonight. The possibility that he wanted her to see he was about to acquire a new toy came to her. Can he possibly imagine, she asked herself, that I might be jealous? No, impossible. More likely he wants me to know I have a rival, wants me to fear he's planning to get rid of me...

The server came to the table with another full round, signaled for by one of the inspectors, and Rozmarik accepted hers gratefully. The strong liquor was beginning to make her feel hollow and unreal. I don't even care, she decided. No matter where he sends me, it will be away from him. I just wish I weren't so tired of keeping up appearances, of doing the right, safe thing. Because someone really ought to help that poor little girl up there. The music began again for another song from Liri, and the remarks from the men at Jom's table grew more and more lewd. Maybe I'm not really here, Rozmarik thought. Maybe I'm home, having a bad dream. None of the people here are noticing me--except the servers, she amended grimly, as another round of drinks, this from an unknown source, was somehow squeezed onto their table.

She sipped hers slowly, then pushed it away. The drinks and the insistent beat of the music added to her nagging fear that Jom was up to something even more malignant than usual, making her feel smothered, as if the oxygen in the room was slowly being sucked out into the darkness lurking all around. Looking across the table she saw her face in the mirrored wall, wreathed in the twisting smoke so that it looked like that of a doomed, everwalking spirit. A premonition of death? she wondered, not knowing whether to be frightened or relieved.

Suddenly a reflected face appeared above hers, that of a tall red-haired man she'd never seen face-to-face before. It was a few seconds before she realized this was the stranger Jom had been so very interested in. His expression offered a sympathy unsullied by condescension--she had the odd idea he knew her, and her impossible situation, and understood. With a faint sound she caught at her throat, fearing she would cry at the unexpected tenderness of a stranger she would never see again. With a solemn nod, he walked away, toward the curtained-off corridor that led backstage.

Only then did Rozmarik notice that the music and the singing were over.

Rozmarik's convulsive movement distracted Jom from his lingering study of the spot where Liri had slipped through the curtain. His heart pounded as he, too, noticed the tall stranger heading backstage. The rumor he'd heard, which had prompted his invitation for Imperial officers to stage a supposedly routine inspection here in Jewelsport, was that Liri, his Liri, was one of Jak Panai's current lovers. Jak was the most desperately wanted criminal currently plying his trade in this quadrant, but only a fool would expect a little detail like that to keep him from coming to see her eventually.

And now, here he was. Big Jom chortled to himself. Descriptions of the pirate were understandably vague--few of his victims ever saw him face-to-face--but all agreed as to his unusual height. The stranger heading backstage to see Liri, walking as if he were assured of his welcome, had to be the man everyone was after. It looked like another commendation for his 'invaluable assistance to the Empire' would soon be forthcoming.

Jom turned to inform the head of the Imperial delegation of his suspicions, then stopped as a new idea came to him. Why let them take all the credit for the smuggler's capture? This was his town, his planet! All he had to do was excuse himself, pick one or two men from the base out of the large selection attending tonight's show, and arrest the malefactor himself! Or better yet--his eyes began to gleam with ambition--do it all on his own! He was armed, as always. Give the fellow a little time alone with Liri to distract him...

Jom licked his lips as he considered what spectacle might be unfolded before his eyes in Liri's dressing room if he gave the couple enough time. Part of him rebelled at the thought of letting another man do things to her he was still only dreaming about. But then, if he burst in, took them by surprise, perhaps even shot the interloper? The look on Liri's face would be a sight to see, no doubt--and it would drive home the fact that he meant business with her like nothing else could.

A quick study of his guests for the evening cemented his plans. They were the usual run of Imperial highrangers--more than polite on the surface, but letting slip an occasional reference to how easy he had things here, how it was the money he had acquired with Imperial assistance that had bought him the local respect which he ordinarily could never have hoped to obtain. Let him do this strictly on his own, without their help, without even bodyguards assisting, and they'd be forced to admit he was their equal in effectiveness and cunning.

Rozmarik observed her husband's eyes following the stranger and his subsequent assumption of what she called his plotting look, and it drew her from the dreamlike despair she'd been drifting down into. He and the guests ignored her nearly as much at home as they did here, and she'd heard the talk of trapping some renegade who'd been stealing enough to hurt even Imperial profits. Whether or not her kindly stranger was the real pirate or not, her husband believed him to be, and she knew Jom well enough to see he was going to act on his discovery now, tonight.

I don't even care that he's a criminal, she decided, trying to force her mind to think clearly through the fog left by the drink. Anything he's done, I'm sure Jom could match for depravity...and Jom would have used the law to do it, or paid someone to break the law for him. I don't want them to get him--I want to make Jom lose something, just once!

As she struggled with a hazy memory of the layout of the building, from a tour taken more than two years ago, she spotted the young officer, Mr. Solo, rising to head once more for the washroom. On impulse, she rose and murmured a leavetaking which did not seem especially noticed.

As Han left the washroom, straightening his jacket, he was astounded to see Rozmarik for the second time that evening, standing almost exactly in the spot where he had last seen her. He blinked, wondering if she was a ghost of his imagination, but she was still there.

"Mr. Solo, may I beg a very great favor of you?" she asked, clutching her wrap with one hand and laying the other very lightly on his. He was shocked at how cold her hand felt--almost too cold for a living body on such a warm evening.

"Anything in my power, Ma'am," he answered, automatically looking down the alley to be sure they were alone. Her air of fearful secrecy was contagious.

"There is a man, a tall man with red hair, here tonight. I just saw him go backstage, and..." Here she paused as though to gather her courage, then leaped into a seemingly hastily planned speech. "Oh, this sounds so bad, to be talking against...my husband and...his guests..." Her eyes met his, as if to see if rejection of such heresy was imminent. "But..." Tears came to her eyes, and she tried to blink them back.

Han saw nothing in the tears but the understandable dismay of a genuine lady trying to steel herself for some awful disclosure. "Go ahead and tell me," he persuaded gently. "I'll do what I can to make things right for you." A fantasy--she wants to leave him, she wants me to hide her, to take her away, to be mine--leapt up and was as quickly slapped down.

"I'm sure you know there is a pirate operating in this sector," she continued. "Jom and these men want him, or rather, they want the reward. They are planning to frame this man in the bar because he fits the description of the pirate. I can't get away to warn him. Do you think you...?"

Han drew back, equally horrified at her revelation and her request. It did not occur to him to doubt her word, not then, but--to help a possible pirate escape! "Ma'am, there's probably a good chance this man is the criminal they're after. Surely you don't want to stand in the way of justice?"

"Murder isn't justice! They're going to shoot him down, with no questions asked!" she cried. "I heard them say so--please believe me!"

Han's forehead puckered in indecision, his brows almost meeting as he tried to decide what to do. "You must be mistaken, Ma'am," he ventured, hoping to reason with her. "There would be nothing gained by this man's murder, if he's just an ordinary spacer. The pirating would still go on--they'd lose much more in the long run than they gained with a plan like you've described."

Rozmarik bowed her head, then turned slightly away from Han, the image of dignified sorrow. "I see I'll have to tell you the rest," she said. "My husband does have a motive for killing this particular man. They are...competing for the affections of the young lady who sings here. With his highly placed friends as witnesses to his belief that this man is a dangerous criminal--"

"Oh. Yes, I see," said Han. He fought back an urge to take Rozmarik in his arms and comfort her. "But--I hope you understand--I have my fleet oath to uphold..." And will I break it more by abetting a murder, or by letting a criminal escape?

"At least go backstage, then," Rozmarik urged. "If you're there as a witness, perhaps they won't kill him outright. You could even keep an eye on him until they arrived."

"Yeah, I can go backstage, check things out, maybe hold this guy until we can get it all settled," Han said slowly, clutching at a plan that allowed him to act honorably, yet gain him time to think about her shattering accusations.

"Bless you," she murmured, and pressed her lips to his hand before darting back inside.

Bewildered at the strange turn the night had taken, Han, too, reentered the cabaret and headed for the backstage area, as he had promised. The second part of the show was scheduled to begin soon, and the few workers not involved in wild changes of props or other such tasks weren't inclined to ask a determined-looking officer what his business was. As Han looked around for a glimpse of the stranger, or the singer, his gaze trailed across a familiar face. Because it was in an unfamiliar setting, his mind did not immediately register the person's identity. When it did, he swung back in shock, his heart sinking.

Moving toward a figure in a monk's robe, he addressed the wearer in quiet, deadly tones. "Boroc, what in hell are you doing?"

Boroc spun around, robe flaring, and peered out of the cowl shading his head. "Solo? Solo, you aren't supposed to be back here! Beat it, before you blow my cover!"

"You tryin' to tell me this," Han gestured at the robe and the crowded, nosy prop pit around them, "is an official assignment?" His voice was still quiet, but his disgust came through plainly.

"Yeah. I'm undercover--on this gig to snag the pirate who's been giving Headquarters and Shipping so much grief. Now lift off!"

"Boroc..." Han was shaking his head, not wanting to believe, refusing to believe. "Boroc, I've heard about this...this part of the show. You aren't in that, are you?"

Boroc grinned maliciously. "You mean the part where the holy brother forsakes his vows of chastity live on stage? Why the hell do you think I volunteered?" He laughed, the sound like a slap, and walked off, leaving a stunned Solo staring after him.

"That isn't right," Han muttered to no one. Moving slowly, but regathering his faculties as he progressed, he headed on to complete his mission, to fulfill Rozmarik's first request. He felt fairly certain now that the mysterious stranger and the much-wanted pirate/smuggler were the same man--but a system that would stoop to such a ploy, that would degrade not only holy orders, but with them, the Fleet Service Han had sworn to honor and uphold--he couldn't, wouldn't be a party to such things, the hell with the consequences. As his anger rose, his steps quickened. Better hurry, he thought. The situation could break at any time.

The dressing room had one bright light over the mirror which etched sharp shadows on the old, stained walls behind the racks of costumes stored there. Liri was leaning forward, palms on the table, staring into the reflection of her eyes. When the door behind her began to open with no warning knock, she whirled, ready to lash out indignantly. Then she saw the intruder as he slipped in sideways, gasped, and grinned. She had to grab the edge of the dressing table to keep herself from rushing headlong into his arms.

"So, Jak, the rumors were right. You really were coming here," Liri said, after she had swallowed down the possibility of a twist in her voice.

"There were rumors that I was coming here?" Jak asked, one eyebrow edging faintly into a frown for a moment. Liri nodded. Jak seemed to consider the possible sources, meanings, and results of this new bit of information, then smiled fatalistically, as though shrugging off what couldn't be changed. "Did you doubt it when you heard it?"

"You know I never believe in good rumors," Liri retorted. She released her grip on the table and moved toward Jak, who met her halfway across the small room. He stood quietly, smiling down into her gamin's face, as she laid her hands on his chest and slowly let them glide over his shoulders. "But here you are, so now I'll believe it." Her fingers twined gently in his hair, and he cradled her in his arms as she nudged his head down to a position where she could meet his lips.

"I'm glad to see you're still alive," she told him, after he resumed his study of her face. "And looking like a saint, I might add."

"Not feeling much like one," he said in a husky whisper. She closed her eyes as he drew his fingertips with feather-lightness under her chin and down the sides of her throat. "Slip away with me for a while?"

"Oh, I can't." She held him more tightly as she continued. "I've got another set to do in about half an hour. I can't risk losing this job right now."

"Why not?"

"Money. I need a certain amount of money saved back, in case...in case I should want to leave Jewelsport. It's a complicated situation..."

"I'm listening," he said, stopping the actions of his hands so they would not make him out a liar.

"The man with the mining leases, he wants me," she said matter-of-factly. "So far, I've been able to hold him off, and I intend to keep up my winning streak. If he tries to force my hand, I'll need a lot of negotiable stuff to get passage offplanet, fast."

Jak nodded reluctantly and released his hold, stepping back a pace after Liri released hers. "If you're in danger, you could come with me now..." he said slowly.

"No," she said softly. "It's not that kind of a problem." She lifted her chin. "I told you I'd come with you when I could stay with you, and I meant it." His dark eyes clouded further in the shadow of momentary temptation, and she reached up with hands like wings to cup his face. "I love you, you know that. I can live with loving you when you're gone better than when I'm with you and know I've got to be leaving you soon." He pressed his hands against hers to hold them where they were for just a few seconds more. "When you're ready to settle down, or even when you decide to risk letting me travel with you--say the word, and I'll come."

Carefully he pulled one of her hands around to his lips to kiss the palm, and she knew the day he would ask her had not come yet. "As for slipping away--after the next show is done, we can be out of here so fast--"

For the second time that night a man entered the dressing room unannounced. Liri half-stifled a shriek, and Jak's hand flew to the concealed knife in his belt buckle. "Sorry to barge in--someone was coming down the other hall," Han said. "No time to go into details, but you've got to get out of here, buddy."

"Why?" demanded Jak crisply.

"Because there's a guy heading this way who wants you dead, whether you've done anything or not. You can believe me or not, but if I were you I'd--"

Almost as though it were a well-rehearsed stage-farce, the dressing room door burst open. Big Jom, with Rozmarik hovering wraithlike behind him, slowly surveyed the stunned occupants of the room, then stepped inside, pulling out his handlaser. "Nobody make a move," he said. Adrenalin coursed through his veins, telling him he had total mastery of himself and of the situation. The others were droid actors, ready to follow his programmed commands. He felt annoyance that a Fleet officer was present, but then, the man barely had enough rank to be called an officer. He wouldn't dare try to grab credit for the pirate's capture, and might actually be of some help, in a general back-up sort of role.

Ah, he could send him to bring more armed men, that was it. All that was needed for the credit of pulling this criminal down was the capture itself, and he had already done--

Pain laced into Jom's side, pain which followed a pressure so subtle he had not noticed it in his excitement. The faces before him gaped, their fear turned to amazement, and Jom craned his head to the left, looking for the source of his agony. Rozmarik was there--Rozmarik, who had joined him in the hall. Rozmarik, who was nothing but a habit now, and whom he ignored unless it suited him otherwise. She stood like an ice statue, her face remorseless, her gaze implacable, and as his fingers found the center of his torment, he knew what she had done. A thin blade, slender as a knitting needle, with a jeweled, enameled hilt, was sticking from his side.

I'm not dead yet, he thought, turning in slow motion, somehow feeling as if he had time enough for anything. But as he moved, his knees buckled, and the red-haired stranger suddenly had his handlaser. Jom fell to the floor, looking up into the circle of faces that were so incredibly far away, and curled back his lips to curse them all. No sound came out. His heart, now faltering every other beat, kept futilely, relentlessly trying to push his lifesblood through collapsing arteries, unable to cease functioning even though it was only forcing the precious fluid out around the gash still partly filled by a silver blade.

The first one to recover speech was Liri. "Jak, you'd better go," she said calmly. His eyes flashed to hers and he opened his mouth to speak. "Go," she repeated. "No time for talking. Just go."

"Now, wait," Han managed to say. Things had gone too far, had gone dreadfully wrong, and he had a queasy idea he was somehow responsible, though he wasn't sure why or how yet. "There's been a,...."

"A killing," Rozmarik finished the sentence for him, adding the word he could not ascribe to her. "I'm afraid, Mr. Solo, that as an Imperial representative, you must apprehend me." She stepped

delicately over the body, with its widening pool of blood, and as she moved, Jak handed Liri the handlaser. With no leavetaking except a touch on Liri's cheek, he slipped out the door.

Rozmarik began to weep, quietly at first, but Han soon found himself holding her up as her shuddering became great, racking sobs. Liri, her pity showing only faintly in her eyes, stood composed, as befit an actress, until she had counted out twice enough time for Jak to be gone. Then her face assumed a look of horror, and she screamed.

* * *

Hard to believe I was ever that naive, Han thought, with a wisp of remorse for the loss of the idealistic youth he had once been. I had no idea what was really happening...if I hadn't gotten so high and mighty about Boroc playing a monk in a sex show, I would have told him the guy he was after was already in the building...they would have gotten him before anything bad happened...maybe. He took a final swallow from the bottle and in uncharacteristic anger hurled it across the room to shatter.

No point in thinking about what might have happened--it was years ago anyway, he told himself savagely. And he couldn't even honestly tell himself it had happened because of the famous curse--he didn't believe the Deity the brethren worshipped cared that much about the reputation of monkly trappings.

What he knew he wouldn't be able to tell Luke--because he could scarcely bear to even recall it--was why he really couldn't bring himself to wear their monk's disguise. Even seeing one vividly stirred up his last memory of Rozmarik.

Rozmarik, pale and queenly with her long, dark hair blowing a strand at a time from its confinement--a rope around her neck--staring at the rolling dark clouds of an upcoming spring storm as a real monk tenderly read her the Last Litany.*





FWOTAM

Maureen Buhman
Karen Howard

(From the More Easily Forgotten Adventures of Luke Skywalker)

Leia awaited Luke in the conference room with growing impatience (the room with grown impatience was already occupied). When he finally arrived, her heart fell at his discouraged expression. Ever thoughtful, the Rebel pilot bent to the floor and retrieved it gently.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," said Luke, breaking the silence in his usual clumsy way. "He wouldn't even listen to me."

"It's not your fault," comforted the former Senator diplomatically. "Han's been so cold, so distant lately."

Luke sighed. "I just can't put my finger on it. We've been working hand-in-hand on all those other missions, and suddenly he's freezing me out."

"If only we didn't need him so...so..." she cried desperately. "But that last fiasco really hurt us. We need a successful mission badly."

This time Luke sighed heavily, causing him to sag slightly forward. "Don't blame yourself. We all thought Retsof's work was just what we needed."

The Princess nodded in agreement--a state she and Luke rarely occupied. "In my mind's eye I can still picture the new hope he promised. But he only served to splinter our cause."

Sadly, the two exchanged glances, then realized they preferred their own expressions. Such exchanges were common among the Rebels.

The facial reciprocation was interrupted by the droids' obligatory untimely entrance. "Excuse us," began C3PO, in his increasingly irritating voice. "I trust we're not interrupting anything important." R2D2 hooted at the unlikelihood of that possibility.

The young princess received them with customary Alderaani grace. "Blast it! Who let you two in?" Alderaani grace blanched.

R2 bleeped a typically incomprehensible response, and C3PO assumed the servile attitude most of the personnel employed in Her Royal Presence. But it failed to soothe the young woman. Sparks of anger shot from her eyes, and Luke backed out of range, nimbly knocking over several pieces of

surprisingly fragile furniture. Taking advantage of the diversion, C3PO left the room in a huff. A minute and a huff later, R2D2 waddled after him.

"And don't come back!"

Lost for words--as was his wont--Luke sighed once more. This was getting out of hand. "I'm sorry," he apologized again, in that verecund tone that always had such a cheering effect on the others. "I really want to be an asset to you."

"Well, you're more than halfway there," responded the Princess encouragingly.

Confused by the left-handed compliment, the pilot thought it best to change the subject. "Well, I'm not going to give up. There's gotta be a way to get Han to warm up to this idea."

"Wait," called Leia before he could leave, "maybe I could give you a hand."

The youngster smiled offhandedly. "Sure. By the way--have you seen my lightsabre?"

Han shivered with the cold rush of anger. How dare they? He was becoming increasingly accustomed to these blow-ups with the princess. But this high-handedness of Luke's was something else entirely.

And of all places to impersonate a monk! Diagona Falls! Slowly he turned, step by step, inch by inch. Until the approach of his former compatriots froze him in his tracks. Leia flashed him a quick smile before refastening her robe. The smuggler's eyes bulged at this unexpected treat, but he managed to force them back in his sophisticated way. A frigid smile camouflaged his boyish leer, and he kept his tone icy.

Chewbacca eyed the humans with alarm, who had a much better view of the situation. He removed himself with alacrity, who would have much preferred to stay. Never mind--everyone knows it's not wise to upset a Wookiee.

Han noted his partner's desertion with grace. "!!?X*#%&&!@#%\$Δ&*"

Offended, grace joined Chewie in his retreat-- which everyone says is lovely this time of year. So the Corellian was left to face the Rebels alone.

"Don't even start," Han growled. A pair of passing Yuzzem answered in kind. Luke studied them, wishing he spoke their language.

Leia shot the Corellian a glacial stare. It missed. "I just don't understand. It's not as if we were asking you to..."

"I know what you're asking me. And you can just forget it!" shouted Han, temper nearly out of control. He tried to calm himself. 'These are my friends,' he thought, disappointed that he had let himself sink so low. Solo counted to ten, lost count, grew confused and began again, surreptitiously glancing at his fingers. "I know you don't understand. How could you? Luke's spent most of his life on that overgrown sandbox, and I know about your home-world, Princess."

"Now just leave Alderaan out of this!" she exploded.

The irate smuggler threw up his hands in exasperation. Luke made a diving catch, and got the force at second.

"Nice play, kid," applauded Han, gratefully accepting the appendages which Luke returned with but a trace of envy.

Leia beamed. Trust Luke to find a way to thaw Han's arctic exterior. She smiled softly at her two friends, having already used up her daily allotment of hard facial expressions.

"I'm sorry, Han," she apologized abruptly. Luke felt bereft--that was his line. "Luke's sorry, too." He felt better. "We didn't mean to be insensitive."

The two men exchanged puzzled looks (deciding to keep them). They thought they were still in the hangar.

Unable to muster further arbitrary objections, Han faced the problem squarely.

"No, Han," gently admonished Leia, "look at me."

Embarrassment flushed Han's naturally macho features. Sketching hurriedly, he drew himself to his full height, dwarfing the others considerably.

"Princess Leia," he stated with assurance, "I shall consider it."

Gazing fondly at his friend, Luke suddenly wondered how the Corellian would look with a full beard and mustache.

Having satisfactorily confounded each other, the three took off to catch up with Chewie and Grace (you remember Chewie and Grace--they were in your quiet parlor that last night when we said our good-byes), and make their plans.

--Will Han change his mind and go on the mission?
--Will Luke stop saying he's sorry?
--Will the Princess get a new allotment of hard facial expressions?
--Will Chewie and Grace return from their retreat?
--Will Luke ever understand the Yuzzem?
--Will any zine print the next unexciting episode of FWOTAM?

CREDITS

Special thanks to Og the Wonder Warthog, Wally ("Fidget's dead!"), Fidget ("I'm not dead yet."), The Supreme Being, and Luke Skywalker's dog (see Star Wars, The Novel, page 96).

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Music by John (who else?) Williams.

Special Effects by 5C Discipline Lunch (chocolate milk is extra).

Critics cheerfully executed.

PLEASE NOTE: Sole rights to this property belong strictly to the aforementioned (or was it five?) incredibly talented word-thieves (that's Line Bandits, you twit!). Any infringement will be considered laughable.*



HEAR ME, BABY?
HOLD TOGETHER!



Twenty-five years ago, in a large American city, a new-born child lay abandoned. He was saved from death by a race of aliens known as the Teachers, beings dedicated to upholding universal concepts of justice. They trained him to be the ultimate

human being, perfect in mind and body. Now he has returned to Earth as Chris Sheridan, who dons a costume and battles crime -- aided by a New York police detective and Caroline, his lover and confidante.....



is for Hazardman not HELLION

Patrick Daniel O'Neill



RAY
OWE
1/83

Chapter 1

She crouched silently in the main entrance of 80 Pine Street. Across the street was the towering structure of 70 Pine, the AIG Building. She watched the activity in front of the Marine Midland Bank there cautiously. The three young men were dressed in the casual, comfortable clothes you would expect on this warm, humid August night -- jeans and t-shirts. Just one thing set them apart: the clothes were entirely black.

The moonlight and streetlights glinted softly off the red-and-black satin of her own tunic and tights as she shook her shoulder-length blonde hair back from her masked face. The building was in the middle of New York's financial district -- not normally a center of activity after dark.

The moment had come. The three dark-clad men had unfurled a colorful cloth from one of their packs -- a Puerto Rican flag. With a single movement, the lithe, graceful blonde stepped from the shadows and snapped open her collapsible crossbow, arming it. She aimed carefully at the one with the flag. "Okay, Jose -- turn around, real slow."

All three terrorists spun at the sound of her voice. "Who -- who are you?!" cried the leader.

"My name's not important," she snapped. "Just back up against the wall, unless you'd like this bolt somewhere in your body." The weapon made an effective argument. They complied.

Removing their weapons, she wrapped all three men in the flag, and laid them down on the sidewalk. Then, using special stone-piercing heads of her own design, she pinned them to the pavement with crossbow bolts. She pulled the wires from their bomb, and tossed the remains on top of the terrorists.

She reached into a pocket within her tunic and produced a small slip of paper, not unlike a calling card. She left it, too, on the pile. It read:

"With my compliments...The HELLION."

"...compliments, the Hellion, indeed! Where does she get that stuff -- old TV shows?"

Caroline McAllister popped her head out of the kitchen. "Did you say something, darling?"

Chris Sheridan turned off the TV news program and entered the dining nook. "Who does this Hellion person think she is, anyway?"

The dark-tressed girl placed some dishes on the table. "I seem to remember a lot of people saying that about the Hazardman a while ago. Set the table, would you?"

Chris arranged the dishes, glasses and tableware, a little more deliberately than necessary. "It's just that -- well, her whole concept just rubs me the wrong way."

"How do you mean that? She sort of reminds me of a female version of the Hazardman." Caroline brought in several dishes of Chinese food.

"Exactly," said Chris, as he sat down to eat. He spooned out spiced shredded beef onto both their plates. "On the surface, it looks like she knows what she's doing, because she's stolen her whole pattern from me -- but she's missing the more complicated parts of my methods."

Caroline put down her fork and rested her chin on her hand. She smiled over-sweetly at him. "Sounds to me as if you're just annoyed at someone stealing your thunder." Chris grumbled and plopped another spoon of beef on his plate.

Later that night, dressed in his new, lightweight uniform, the Hazardman quietly approached a certain window in the Midtown South Precinct House in Manhattan. He tapped lightly on the window. The figure at the desk turned slowly and smiled in recognition. He opened the window, and the Hazardman pulled himself to a seat on the sill. "How you doing, Bingo?"

Police lieutenant Robinson Crosby, "Bingo" to his friends, wiped some sweat off his brow. "Pretty good, I suppose. I could do without this heat, though. Hey -- your competition put on a pretty good show down in the Wall Street district last night. Maybe I should look into changing my costumed contacts."

"If I'm supposed to find that amusing, you don't know me as well as you pretend." The masked man ran a black-gloved hand through his

hair. "As a matter of fact, I did want to talk to you about that."

"You mean the Hellion?" Crosby grinned.

The Hazardman hit him lightly on the shoulder. "No, the terrorists, wise guy! Did you guys get anything out of the three Little Miss Marvelous nabbed for you last night?"

"Funny you should ask -- Command just circulated copies of that info to all precincts. And the answer to your question is 'zilch'. These characters act like prisoners of war -- name, rank, and serial number. And it's usually just their street name at that." Crosby tossed a very thin file to his friend.

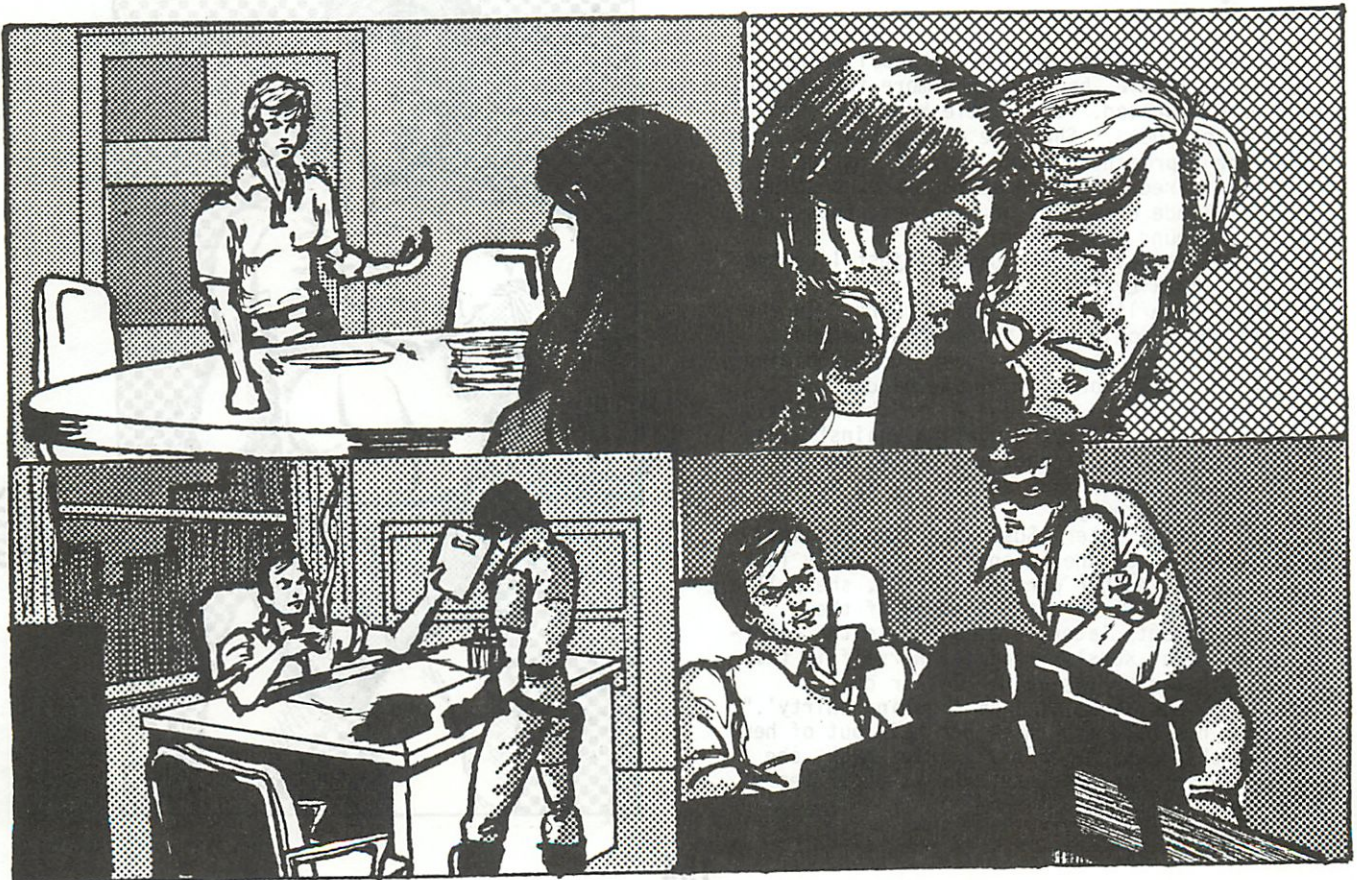
The vigilante detective took a moment to scan through the file's contents. "This is everything? None of them even have priors?"

"Nothing worth mentioning. Up 'til last night, they're all basically clean as a whistle."

The Hazardman slid off the windowsill and paced to the front of the lieutenant's desk. "Bingo, this is getting us nowhere. We're constantly treating the symptoms instead of the disease -- and the disease is becoming an epidemic. Guys like these three aren't bright enough to have finished high school, let alone build a sophisticated bomb. There has to be somebody big in back of them." He handed the file back to Crosby.

"Agreed, Haz. But how do we find him?"

The Hazardman leaned out the window and grabbed the grappling line hanging there. Turning back, he answered, "I've got an idea -- see you later, Bingo!" In a moment, he had disappeared into the overcast August night.





Chapter 2

Susan Kessler finished her trampoline routine with a triple, bounced once more for effect, and then dismounted. The little knot of people watching applauded. She gave a mock bow and joined the approaching young man, taking the towel he offered. She mopped her face, pushing the damp blonde curls out of her eyes, then hung the towel around her neck.

"That was beautiful, Susan -- just like the old days," Mark Evans said.

"Not quite like the old days, Mark. In the old days there would have been a few hundred people in the bleachers, and some judges holding cards with numbers on them." She padded softly toward the showers. "Of course, in the old days, I wasn't pushing thirty, competing against kids half my age." She shrugged and closed the door to the shower room. Mark simply stared and shook his head slowly.

Ten minutes later, Susan had showered and, feeling refreshed, she re-entered the empty locker room. Opening her personal locker, she pulled out the red-and-black satin costume of the Hellion. Moments later, clad again in the colorful suit, Susan Kessler regarded herself in the full-length mirror inside her locker door. "Hmmm...not bad, even if I am 'pushing thirty'." She shook her head and threw her hair out of her face. Picking up the bright scarlet mask, she pulled it over her head, tucking it under her hair.

She threw a coil of nylon line over her shoulder, and sneaked out of the gym. Catching the line on a flagpole, she swung up to the rooftop and began moving south, down Broadway, to Herald Square.

A knock at the door of his bedroom awoke him, nearly instantly. "Chris? It's nine-forty-five."

"Right, Caroline -- I'm awake." He threw off the sheet, and padded across the throw rug to the mirror. Clad only in briefs, he visually examined his body, testing certain movements, and tensing muscles. He sent his mind into his body, probing pathways of nerves and blood. Satisfied that his condition was excellent, he grabbed his maroon costume slacks from the chair and pulled them on.

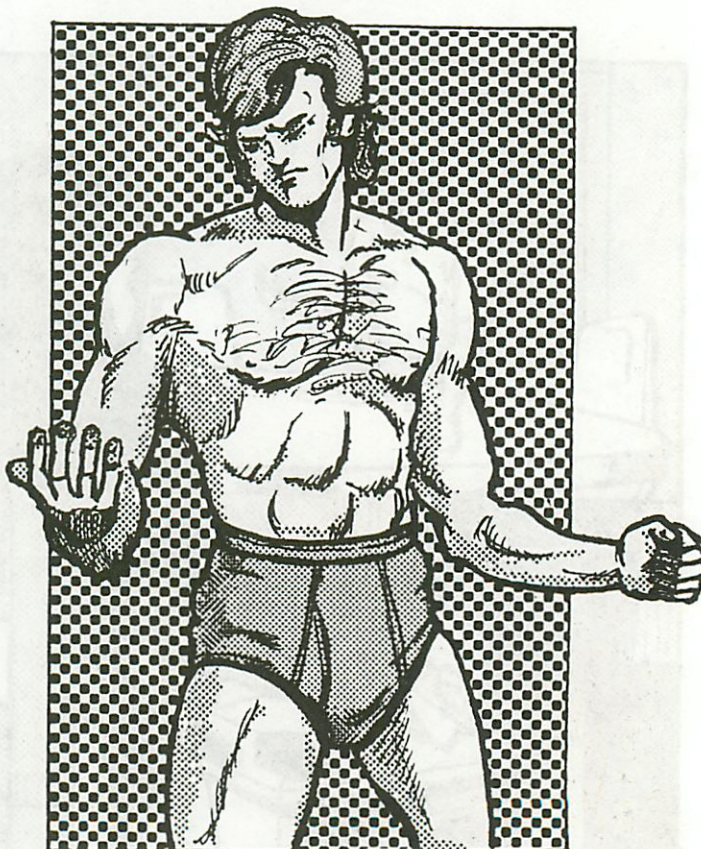
Still buckling the belt, he walked into the living room. Caroline was curled up on the couch, watching the lights of Manhattan across the river. "Car --"

She turned and gasped slightly. "Whoops! You shouldn't reveal your 'magnificent body' so blatantly, Mr. Sheridan. I'm liable to drag you right back into the bedroom." She got up and kissed him. "You want a lift?"

"Thanks. Word on the street is that the independistas' next target will be a major department store. Feel up to a trip to Macy's?"

"Okay, but I'd rather go while it's open."

Chris pulled on a t-shirt, picked up the bag filled with his gear, and together they left the



apartment. Ringing for the elevator, Caroline turned to him. "Chris, you sure this is going to work?"

"Nothing is positive, Caroline...but there has to be more to this bombing craze than a bunch of isolated fanatics."

"Somebody higher up, doing the planning and thinking?"

"Exactly," he answered, as they left the elevator. "And the bomb-building."

Twenty minutes later, Caroline was parking her VW Rabbit in the garage in the Madison Square Garden complex. Chris picked up his bag and they walked to the street level, a block south on Seventh Avenue from the world's largest store: Macy's, a New York landmark. "Okay, Car, I don't expect any action until eleven-thirty at least. Why don't you go over to the bar in the Statler, have a drink, and I'll meet you by twelve-thirty."

"Okay, Chris," she answered. She reached up and lightly kissed him. "Be careful."

"Always." He moved casually up the street, and stopped in the darkness of the Penn Arcade to change his shirt and strap on his other gear: the disruptor pistol, the vibro-blade and his mask. Now he pulled the grappling line from his belt and tossed it to the closest outcropping on the giant store. Hand over hand, he went to the ledge, and crouching, he waited.

After an hour of boredom, the silence broke. A trio of black-clad youths came out of the subway at Sixth Avenue. One of them carried a large box, which he handled very carefully. "This is it," thought the Hazardman. "They'll set up their bomb and leave and then I'll know the whole story."

Below him, on the street, the terrorists went about their work. They placed the precious box in the entrance to Macy's in the middle of the block. Next one of them produced some kind of poster and plastered it to the wall. When the preparations were done, the leader gestured for them to leave. The Hazardman tensed to follow.

THWIPPP! CHOK!

"What the hell was that?" A crossbow bolt had whizzed past the ear of the lead bomber, embedding itself in the wall beside the poster. And now a blonde woman, in red-and-black, had placed herself, armed with the crossbow, between the independistas and escape.

The Hellion gestured with her weapon for the three youths to line up against the wall. With one eye on them, she pulled apart the bomb and tore the poster from the wall.

Still watching from above, the Hazardman had had enough. He dropped to the sidewalk behind her. "What do you think you're doing?"

She whirled to face him. "Hazardman! Boy, am I glad to see you -- now you can watch these three while I go get a cop." She smiled beneath her scarlet mask.

The Hazardman sighed. "Oh well, it's too late to follow them back to their headquarters now," he thought. He pulled his disruptor pistol from its holster. "All right, Hellion, but hurry back. We've got some things to discuss." She cocked her head in confusion, but turned and raced for the corner. "Boy, am I gonna have a story for Caroline," mused the masked man.



Moments later, the adventuress returned with a policeman. The vigilantes turned their prisoners over to him, as he commented: "Gee, it's good to see you two working together." The Hazardman grimaced.

The Hellion turned to him, blithely asking, "So what's the topic of discussion, Haz?"

"My name is Hazardman. And our discussion isn't for the whole damned city. Follow me." He tossed his grappling line to a cornice and swung to the rooftops. The Hellion followed.

Chapter 3

Caroline was still in the bar at the Statler at twelve-thirty, alone. "Wonder what's keeping Chris?" she thought.

A new patron came in and struck up a conversation with the bartender. "You shoulda seen it, Nat! That Hazardman guy and the Hellion dame -- they just turned a bunch of hoods over to the cops."

Caroline grinned and bowed her head, to hide her amusement. "Chris and the Hellion together," she thought. "Yes, my friend, that must have been something!"

The couple in question were seated on a ledge overlooking the clock in Herald Square. "What's the big deal, Hazardman? We stopped those three from blowing up Macy's, didn't we?" The Hellion's tone indicated she found the Hazardman's attitude difficult to fathom.

"Yes, we did -- and tomorrow night, there'll be three more just like them planting a bomb somewhere else. Even you, I, and the cops can't be on every street in the city all the time."

The blonde's mouth turned down in a scowl. "So, what do we do?"

The masked man stood up and scanned over the rooftops. "Well, I don't know about you -- but I had intended to follow those three back to their leaders."

"Oh, I did blow it, didn't I?"

He turned to face her. "Hellion -- I appreciate the ... uh ... honor of someone imitating me, but there's more to what I do than a flashy costume and bouncing around on buildings." She began to speak, but he shushed her with an upheld hand. "Have you ever read comic books?"

She shook her head. "Not since junior high."

"Well, they're something of a special interest of mine. Remember the Batman?"

"Just the TV show."



"A buffoon. In comics, the Batman was -- is -- more than just a man in a strange suit. He's a creature of the night, designed to create fear and terror among criminals -- the Darknight Detective."

"Detective -- that's the operative word. The Batman and I have a lot in common. I don't just jump around New York looking for crime. I pick out something and investigate it -- before I act."

"Detection, deduction, planning -- they're all a part of what I do and what I am -- much more so than the technology and hardware I use."

The Hellion was downcast. "You think I should quit?"

"I think you should quit acting without thinking," he replied. "You're pretty good. You've taken out some dangerous and desperate characters -- without harming them or you. With planning you'd be even better."

She stood on the ledge, and watched the thin stream of traffic crawl down Broadway. "So, I guess we're finished for tonight. Sorry, Haz."

"Maybe not," mused the masked man, scratching the back of his neck. "Let me check back with a friend and I'll meet you on the McAlpin roof at two."

"Right, see you there." They swung off in opposite directions.

The Hazardman changed clothes on the low roof over the Statler's lobby, entered the building by an office window, and took the elevator to the lobby, where he met Caroline in the bar.

She was facing the door when he entered. "Chris!" she cried. "How's your blonde friend?"

"Cut it out, Car," he answered.

"Sorry, darling. She screwed up the whole plan, didn't she?"

"Yes, but we may be able to rescue it, with Bingo's help." He put his arm around her and walked her to the door.

"We?"

"The Hellion and me." Caroline frowned at him. "Well, maybe she's not really so bad after all," he said sheepishly.

Caroline stopped and leaned against a lamp-post. "So, what am I supposed to do?"

He put an arm around her, drew her to him, and gave her a kiss. "Take the Rabbit and go home. I'll probably be busy 'til morning."

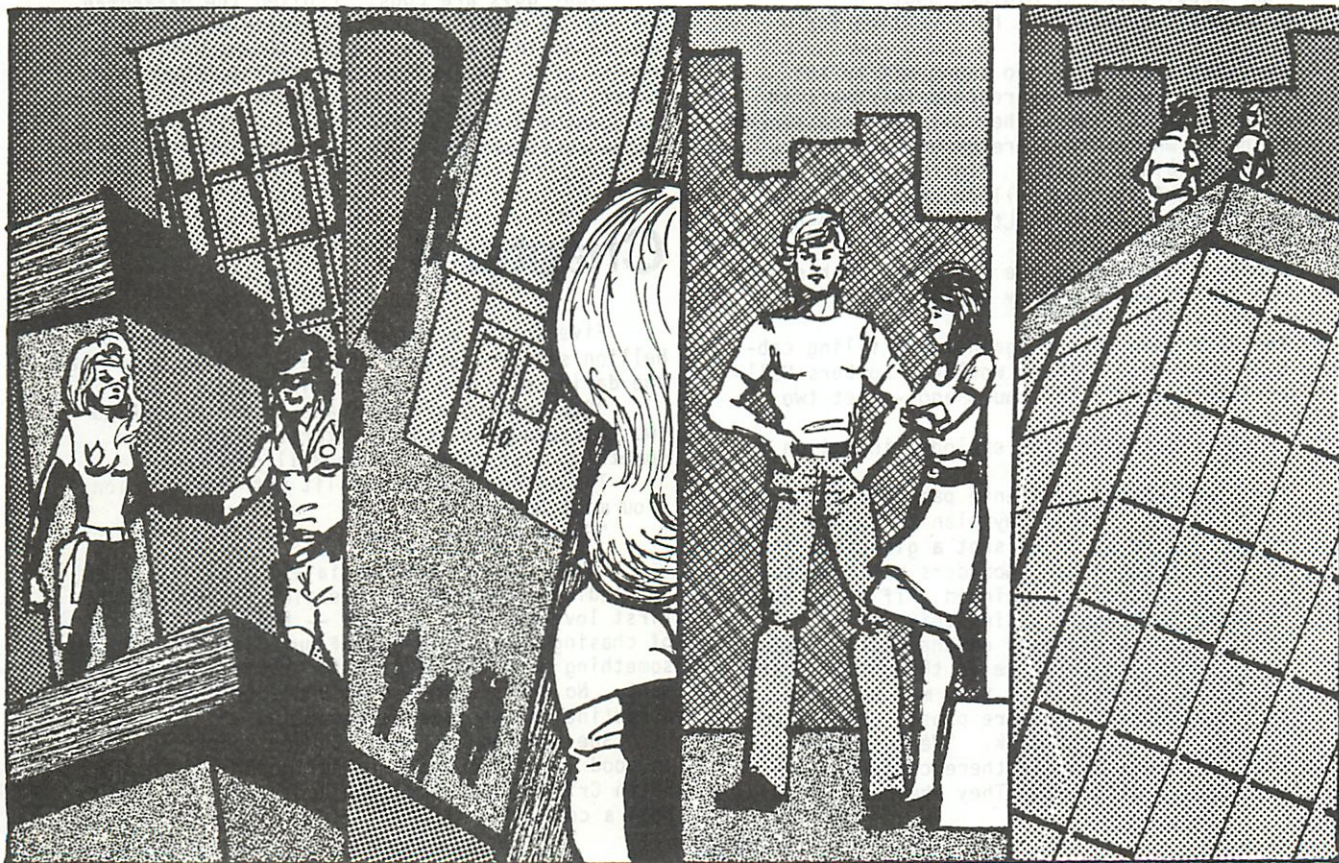
She touched his cheek lightly. "Be careful."

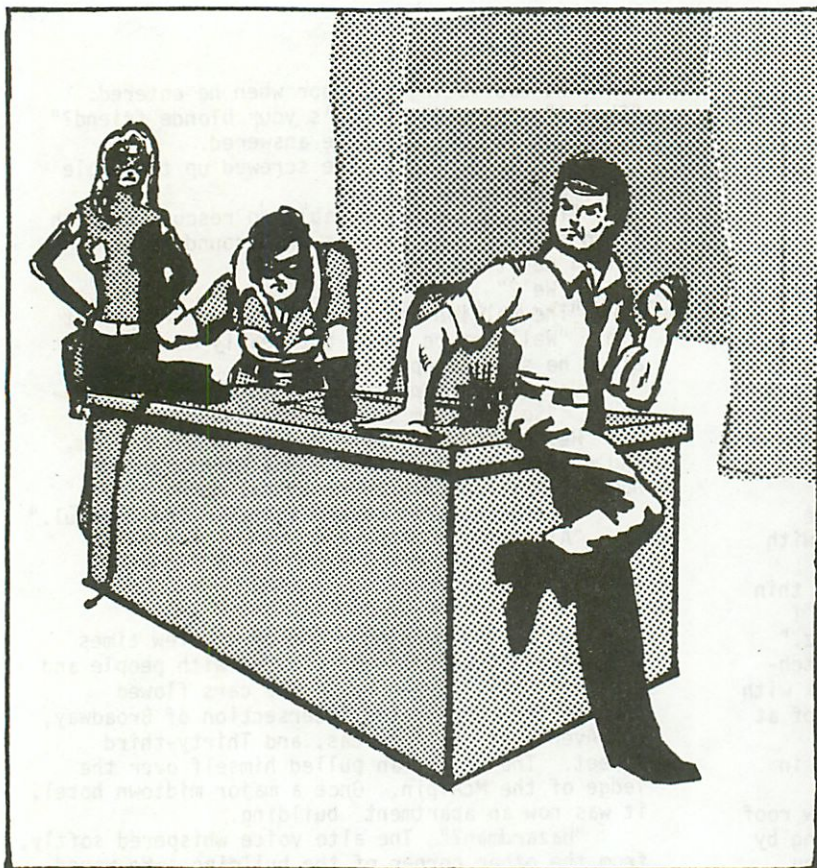
"Always."

Two in the morning: one of the few times when Herald Square is not crowded with people and traffic. Still, even now, some cars flowed through the complicated intersection of Broadway, the Avenue of the Americas, and Thirty-third Street. The Hazardman pulled himself over the ledge of the McAlpin. Once a major midtown hotel, it was now an apartment building.

"Hazardman?" The alto voice whispered softly, from the other corner of the building. He moved toward it.

"Lo Hellion. Well, it's all set."





She raised one eyebrow behind her mask. "What is?"

"Our appointment at Midtown South HQ. I called my police contact -- he's waiting for us."

Together the masked duo swung off to the north and west, until they reached Thirty-fifth Street and Ninth Avenue. They climbed in a second-story window, where they were greeted by a very tired-looking Bingo Crosby. "Introduce me, Haz."

"Bingo, this is the Hellion, if you hadn't guessed. Hellion, this is Lt. Robinson Crosby -- 'Bingo' to his friends."

Crosby slumped into the chair behind his desk. "So what do you want from my overworked life, masked man -- and woman?"

The Hazardman leaned against the filing cabinet by the window. "Those would-be bombers Hellion and I turned in a few hours ago -- let two of them go."

Crosby and the Hellion exploded in unison. "WHAT?!"

The black-haired vigilante paced to the front of Crosby's desk. "Bingo, my plan to follow them tonight got fouled up." He shot a glance at the Hellion, who shrugged her shoulders as if to say "sorry". The Hazardman continued, "If we're ever going to find the people behind this..."

Crosby slammed his hand on the desk. "Damn it, Haz -- don't you think we've thought of that? These guys are streetwise -- they may not have records, but otherwise they're pros." He walked to the other side of the desk. "We tried it with the characters Blondie there captured down in the financial district. They obviously fig-

ured they were being tailed and lost my men in less than half-an-hour."

"Your guys are cops," replied the Hazardman. "And you're right -- any streetwise punk will read a cop in a minute. But I -- and Hellion -- aren't cops. We don't have to follow them from street level even --"

Crosby picked up the phone. "Okay, okay, you've convinced me -- let me see what I can do."

Chapter 4

Five in the morning: the Hazardman and the Hellion sat in Crosby's office, awaiting word that the daring plan would be set in motion.

"So, anyway, after I came in third, behind two thirteen-year-olds, I started looking for something else to do." The Hellion sighed.

The masked man's face lit with recognition. "You must be --"

"Susan Kessler. Yes."

"Look, Susan, I appreciate the difficulties of finding a rewarding profession to replace your first love so early in life -- but this life of chasing down the dregs of humanity, it takes something more than a gift for swift, fluid movement. No one's shooting at you when you're doing a routine on the balance beam."

She scowled at him. "Do you think I majored in good looks and charm in college? I've got a BA in Criminal Justice from John Jay. I could've been a cop --"

"Well, that's a start..." mused the Hazardman. "A start!" The Hellion thrust herself out of her chair and pointed her finger in the vigilante's face. "Look, Mister High-and-Mighty Hazardman -- I am not have the advantage of your sophisticated equipment" -- she indicated his gun and blade -- "and it's obvious you're just a little special in the strength and stamina department, but damn it, I can hold my own against these 'dregs'...."

Red with anger, she turned away from him, then suddenly swung back. "And another thing -- who says I'm doing this just as a kick, a replacement for the high of competition? I'm just as dedicated to the idea of justice for the common man as you are, buddy. Who appointed you to this job, anyway?"

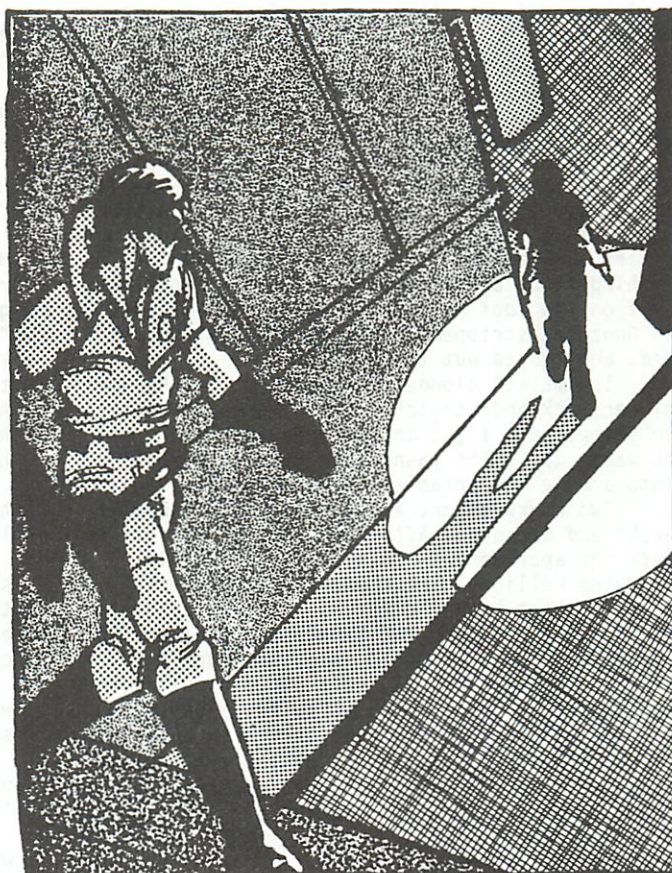
The Hazardman was about to answer, when the door swung open and Crosby entered.

"Well, you got it, Haz...and I don't mind telling you I had to pull strings all the way up to the Commissioner's staff." Crosby crossed the room to his desk and sank into the chair, propping his feet on the desk. "But Gonzalez and Vega will be released from our lock-up in about fifteen minutes...because of 'insufficient evidence'."

"This had better work out, buddy -- or my ass is gonna be in a sling...and every cop in this city will be after your hide."

The Hazardman gripped the lieutenant's hand firmly. "Thanks a lot, Bingo -- I'll make you proud of me."

"Uh huh... I just hope I won't have to use that line in your eulogy."





A few minutes later, the Hazardman and the Hellion were on the roof of Midtown South, as Gonzalez and Vega boisterously left the building.

The masked duo surreptitiously followed the independistas north along Ninth Avenue until they reached the corner of Forty-second Street. There, Gonzalez turned west, moving deeper into the neighborhood called Clinton, but better known as Hell's Kitchen. Vega went east, into the heart of Times Square and the city's "combat zone". The Hellion followed Gonzalez, the Hazardman trailed Vega.

Vega moved smoothly along the crowded sidewalks of Forty-second Street. He paid little attention to the gaudy displays of sex books and movies in the various windows, although he occasionally called out greetings to people he passed on the street. The Hazardman trailed him from the rooftops and cornices of Times Square's theaters and hotels, until they reached Seventh Avenue, which is Times Square proper -- so named because its center is the Times Tower, once the home of the New York Times, now just another office building.

At Seventh Avenue, Vega entered the IRT subway. "Shit," thought the masked man. "I'll lose him if I don't go in...but how do I hide my outfit?" Throwing caution to the winds, the Hazardman dropped to the street level and ducked into a doorway. Pulling off his shirt, mask, gloves and gunbelt, he wrapped them into a ball, and tossed the package onto a roof. "The way my luck's been running," he thought, "some pigeon

will crap all over that stuff before I can retrieve it."

Bare-chested in the cool of the August morning, Chris Sheridan followed his quarry into the subway. Vega took an uptown Broadway local, and Chris got on the same train.

Meanwhile, crosstown, the Hellion had tracked Gonzalez to a rundown apartment building on Fiftieth Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues. Gonzalez unlocked the street door and headed upstairs. A few moments later, a light went on in a third floor apartment. Hellion stationed herself on the roof across the street and watched as Gonzalez stripped, flopped onto his unkempt bed, and turned out the light.

The masked blonde put her hands on the small of her back and stretched. "Oh, great! He gets to sleep...and I get to sit here and wait until he wakes up." She yawned and settled herself into a more comfortable position for her vigil.

Two hours later, about nine a.m., Gonzalez awoke and dressed. After two cups of coffee, he left the apartment -- followed by a swiftly wearying Hellion. She shadowed him to Tenth Avenue, where he hailed a cab. The ex-gymnast lightly dropped onto the trunk hood and, at the first red light, she slid into the trunk.

The Hellion finally felt the cab pull over and stop some twenty minutes later. They were now around East 110th Street, the area called Spanish Harlem. She got out of the trunk while Gonzalez paid the fare. She slipped into an alleyway and watched as he entered a building in the middle of the block.

"WHEEEET! Hey -- psst!"

The Hellion whirled at the sound, to find the Hazardman perched on a windowsill above her. "Haz! How long have you been there?"

He dropped to her level. "I was watching as you crawled out of the cab's trunk. Most people prefer the seats inside."

"Very funny." Hands on hips, she turned from him and studied the doorway Gonzalez had entered. "Is that the same place..."

"...that Vega went into? Yes," answered the Hazardman. "It's either their headquarters or a rendezvous point." He leaned against the wall, gazing intently at the building in question. "Nobody except Gonzalez has entered or left since Vega arrived around six." He stretched his torso, trying to work out the kinks from the long night. After following the terrorist to this building, he had called Crosby and had it staked out until he could return in costume.

Suddenly, a movement in the building caught his eye. "Something's happening over there -- let's move!"

Together, the masked duo darted across the street, into the building, and up the stairs to the third floor. There, they took up posts to either side of an apartment door, as a loud voice came from within.

"Estupidos! You do not have the brains you were born with! The policia must have had a reason for letting you go!"

Vega's voice responded from the other side of the door. "Si, Roderigo, they said they had 'insufficient evidence' to hold us."

"Insufficient -- those two Anglos caught you with the bomb in your hands! I tell you you were followed!"



"No," answered Gonzalez. "We never saw a cop, either of us."

The man called Roderigo grew more quiet. "Muy bien, perhaps los puercos could not count on the testimony of the masked ones. That would explain your release." The Hazardman's heightened hearing could detect movement on the other side of the door. Then Roderigo's voice resumed, "Here is the bomb I have prepared for our next 'message'. In time, the Anglos will learn that the independistas do not give up easily."

"Where is this one planned for?" asked Vega.

"The Midtown South Precinct House," came the answer.

That was enough for the Hazardman. He motioned for the Hellion to cover him with her crossbow, as he stepped before the apartment door and gave it a kick with all his Teacher-trained strength, placing his foot just above the lock. With a tremendous crack, the door burst open. "Don't go for the guns, guys!" called out the Hellion, brandishing the crossbow menacingly.

All three terrorists, Gonzalez, Vega and Roderigo, raised their hands in the air, confronted by the Hazardman's disruptor pistol now, as well as the Hellion's bow. "Okay, move against the wall," advised the masked man. He nodded to the Hellion, who guarded the prisoners, while the Hazardman examined the bomb-makings on the table. As he concentrated on them, he failed to see Roderigo's hands stray to the back of his collar.

Surreptitiously, the bomb-maker pulled a thin knife from a sheath hidden under his shirt, as the Hellion was distracted by the Hazardman's movements over the bomb. She caught Roderigo's final movement at the last second, as he tossed the stiletto at the Hazardman.

"HAZ! DUCK!"

The Hazardman stooped and whirled, firing his disruptor pistol at the knife-wielder. The burst of light from the gun caught the terrorist at the base of the neck, and he collapsed to the floor.

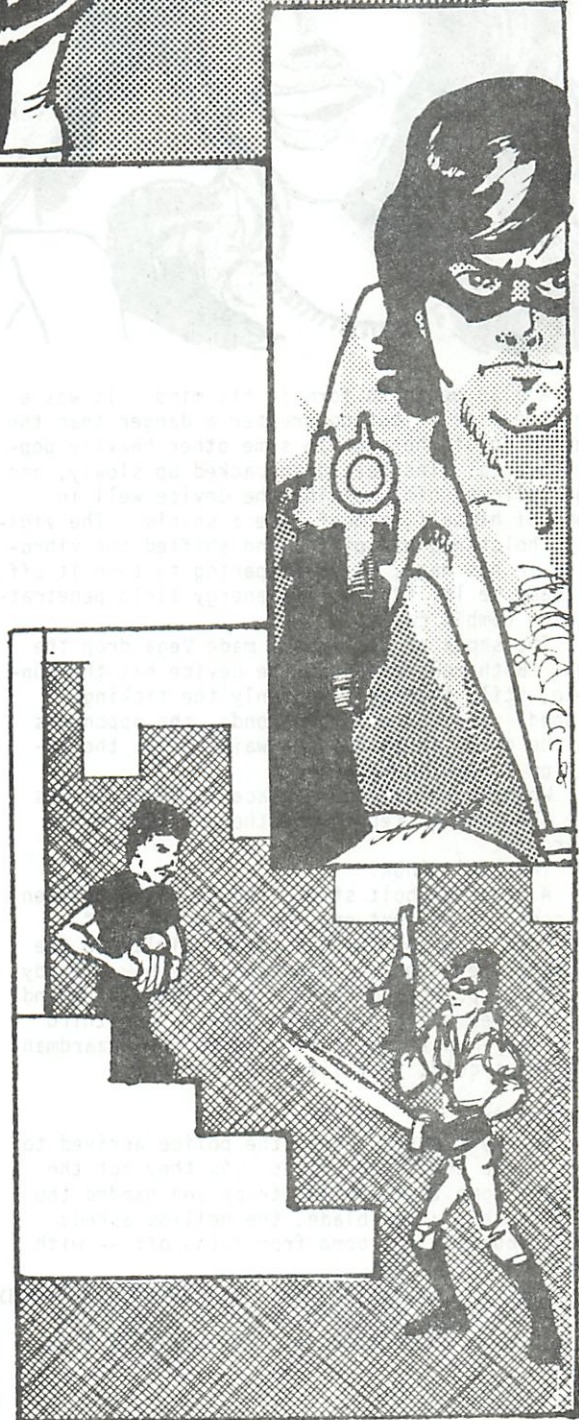
At the same moment, Vega and Gonzalez saw their chance for a break and dove for the door. Vega made it through, grabbing the bomb from the table; but Gonzalez was stopped when a crossbow bolt pinned him to the door by the shoulder. "Haz, the other one's getting away!" cried the Hellion.

"The hell he is!" replied the Hazardman as he leaped out the window.

The vigilante did a handspring off the first-floor windowsill and landed at the foot of the main steps to the building. He met Vega at the entrance with his pistol and vibro-blade both drawn.

But Vega was equally prepared -- the bomb in his hand was ticking. "Back off, Anglo," snarled the independista, "or this whole neighborhood goes up!"

The Hazardman glanced around him. It was mid-morning; the street was crowded with people headed for the grocerias and bodegas. A large group of them had gathered across the street, watching the confrontation between the masked man and the bomber. An explosion here and now would end the lives of dozens -- yet, if he backed off, could he guarantee that Vega knew how to deactivate the bomb?





A plan began to form in his mind. It was a terrible risk -- but no greater a danger than the bomb going off here or in some other heavily populated area. The Hazardman backed up slowly, and Vega followed him, holding the device well in front of himself, almost like a shield. The vigilante holstered his pistol and shifted the vibro-blade in his hand, as if preparing to turn it off. Instead, he let it fly, its energy field penetrating the bomb's casing.

The shock of the impact made Vega drop the bomb. Both men tensed as the device hit the concrete, still ticking. Suddenly the ticking stopped. For three long seconds, the opponents and the crowd stood hushed, waiting for the explosion. Nothing happened.

When Vega realized his ace-in-the-hole was gone, he took a step toward the now-weaponless Hazardman.

THWIPPP! CHOK!

A crossbow bolt struck the sidewalk between his feet. "The next one goes in your leg."

Both Vega and the Hazardman whirled to the doorway, where the Hellion stood, he bow already reloaded, cocked and ready. Gonzalez was behind her, trussed up in her nylon line. "The third one's still upstairs," she said to the Hazardman, "still out-cold, just like you left him."

Twenty minutes later, the police arrived to pick up the three terrorists. As they put the now-safe bomb in a special truck and handed the Hazardman his vibro-blade, the Hellion asked: "How'd you keep the bomb from going off -- with that?"

"Yes -- my vibro-blade. I figured its energy field would disrupt the electronic signal from the timer to the detonator. Fortunately, I was right."

"Pretty neat," she replied, regarding the knife, now safe in its sheath on the Hazardman's left boot. "Know where I can get one?"
The Hazardman just grinned.

Epilogue

Chris Sheridan and Caroline McAllister applauded as the gymnastic team finished its dazzling display on the mats, rings and bars. Caroline turned to Chris, and asked, "Why do you get such joy out of watching this stuff? You do wilder gymnastic moves every night...and on rooftops, not gym floors."

"True, but I'm not normal, Car," answered Chris, as they got up and left the stands. "And these people are just getting to the edge of my training with the Teachers. They're learning ways to stretch their bodies, and by analogy, their minds, to new limits."

The couple had just reached the exit when they bumped into an attractive blonde. "Whoops, excuse me," apologized Caroline. And then she gasped as the woman turned around. "You -- you're Susan Kessler! You were one of the greatest!"

Susan smiled. "Thank you." Then she noticed Chris. "And you're Christopher Sheridan, from the soap operas."

Chris smiled in acknowledgement of his identity.

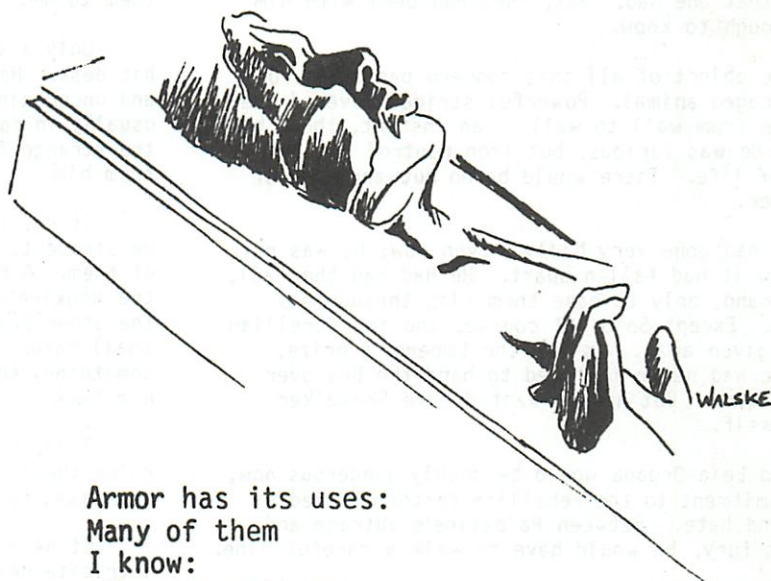
"Strange, but I feel as though I've met you in person somewhere before," continued the ex-gymnast.

"I don't see how that's possible. I'd remember." Then Chris grinned. "But I do remember your gymnastic career. You were quite a 'hellion' on the uneven bars."

Exoskeleton

(The Princess' private reply to compliments on how well she is managing to cope with her losses; not long after Cloud City.)

Don't think
I'm cold and aloof,
Pay tribute to
My detachment,
My ability to continue
To act,
Because the truth is
This armor
And I have become rather
Attached,
Though the truth is
This armor
no longer suits
The princess inside
Very well;
I admit that
For now
I cannot put
This protection,
This false front,
Aside;
I cling to it,
Because
Recently
I seem to have gone
All soft
Inside--
Mushy,
You might say
That
This composed surface
Has become an end
In itself,
A support
To which I apply
Myself
Thoroughly
Because I must.



Armor has its uses:
Many of them
I know:
Like many others
I have come to rely on
This aspect
Of mine,
This polished form
I maintain,
Unyielding,
And precisely
Articulated,
Just so;
As I said,
Armor has its uses--
Many of them
I know:
I have appearances
To keep
Me
Up.

Liz Sharpe

For Auld Lang Syne

Marcia Brin

They tiptoed past the room. Though they knew the metal walls and thick insulation would undoubtedly keep the occupant from hearing their passage, still, there was no point in taking chances. At any time, but especially now. He was in a rare taking. Not that it was easy to tell, ice water in his veins, that one had. But, they had been with him long enough to know.

The object of all this concern paced his room like a caged animal. Powerful strides covered the distance from wall to wall in an instant, then, back again. He was furious, but iron control had become a way of life. There would be no outward sign of his anger.

It had gone very badly. Even now, he was not sure how it had fallen apart. He had had them all, in his hand, only to have them slip through his fingers. Except Solo, of course, and the Corellian he had given away. As for the Emperor's prize, well, he had never intended to hand the boy over to Palpatine. But he had wanted Luke Skywalker for himself.

And Leia Organa would be doubly dangerous now, her commitment to the rebellion further fueled by grief and hate. Between Palpatine's outrage and Organa's fury, he would have to walk a careful line.

Yet, his thoughts kept turning to Solo. Why? The Corellian was nobody special. True, he had helped to destroy the **Death Star**--for which the Dark Lord held no grudge; such things were foolish wastes of energy--and he had faced his fate with courage and a great measure of selflessness. Though unmoved by such displays, Vader was not beyond recognizing them.

Why, then, was Solo haunting him? The Corellian was gone--but it was not his going that disturbed the Dark Lord's thoughts. He had done worse to others and had committed greater betrayals.

No, it was...something else. Something that whispered in his memory. A look, a movement he had seen before, but could not identify now.

The communicator buzzed loudly, interrupting his concentration. Angrily, he whirled, but caught himself. His voice betrayed nothing, as he faced the vidscreen.

"My Lord," Admiral Pielt began apologetically, "we have two boxes here, filled with items taken from the **Millennium Falcon**. What should be done with them?"

Perhaps. Perhaps the answer lay there. "Bring them to me." He flicked the vidscreen off.

Only a short while later, the two boxes sat on his desk. He stood before them, strangely reluctant and uncertain, something he was not used to. He was usually in complete control, but, this time, he had the strange feeling that something was getting away from him.

If so, it was time to do something about it. He strode to the boxes and began to look through one of them. A few items of the Princess', many more of the Wookiee's. Nothing of Solo's. He switched to the other box. Almost at the bottom, he came upon a small case. He reached for it and then drew back. Something, something he could not understand, held him back.

Then, impatiently, he waved it aside. Fear ruled the lives of lesser men, not his. Grasping the case, he opened it.

It held a gleaming silver pendant, set with an intricate design.

For a breathless moment, the world reeled around him, as the memory fell into place. Then, the years fell away and he stepped from the darkness into the light.

* * * *

As usual on Ardal, the sun blazed hotly. But the rains were frequent and heavy, and the world was green. He loved the sun, loved the way it warmed him, and its blinding light. Normally, he would be outside on such a beautiful day, but today was special. Grandmother and Grandfather were taking him to Caral for the day, to celebrate his thirteenth birthday. He had never been to a city the size of Caral before; his parents chose to stay out here on the estate, on the edge of the Dorn Wilderness. The only town he had ever been to was fifteen miles away, where his school was located.

Not that they were cut off; his parents were wealthy and the estate had every luxury. The most

up-to-date communications equipment kept them in touch with the rest of the Republic, and Father's business could usually be conducted from here.

It was fine with him. He liked it out here. Still, he was more than a little excited about the trip today. Besides, Grandfather said he could have anything he wanted!

A movement caught his eye. His mother was carefully brushing out his jacket. Though it appeared he would get his size from his father, he had his mother's coloring, the same flaming hair and emerald eyes. He adored both his parents--and that incorrigible scamp that passed for his brother. He could not believe how much trouble that little kid got into. Mother assured him that all three-year-olds were like that, but he was sure that they must have gotten an unusual example of the breed!

As if to prove the truth of this belief, a very young voice could suddenly be heard through the open windows. "Here, kitty. C'mere, pretty kitty."

"Kitty?" His mother sounded puzzled, and moved toward one of the windows. Peering out, she gasped. "Oh, no, a craval!" Smallish wild cats, cravals were notoriously bad-tempered.

"I'll get him, Mother." He jumped up and raced across the huge lawn toward a large grouping of bushes. As he ran, he could see a pair of chubby legs disappear into the bushes.

He got there a few seconds later, and, getting down low, charged into the underbrush. Following the childish voice, he groped around and finally grabbed a small foot. Pulling backward despite loud protests, he began to inch out of the bushes and eventually reached the carefully manicured lawn.

He had almost lost his captive several times due to wriggling of truly monumental proportions, but now he grasped his belt and pulled the young child completely out of the underbrush and set him down on the grass. Despite looking somewhat the worse for wear, and being covered with dirt, his younger brother glared at him out of hazel eyes.

"I want the kitty! Mean Darth!"

He was hard pressed not to laugh at the younger boy's fury, but he knew it would only make him angrier. "Listen, dummy," he said affectionately, "that 'kitty' was not nice; it would have scratched your eyes out."

The boy drew his brows together and looked at his older brother seriously. "Bad kitty?" he asked.

"Very bad," Darth agreed. "I'll tell you what: if you're a really good boy, I'll bring you a kitten when I come home with Grandfather and Grandmother. O.K.?"

The other boy nodded vigorously and his face lit up. Then he jumped up and gave his sitting brother an enthusiastic, if somewhat sloppy, kiss on the cheek. Darth laughed and picked him up, and carried him into the house.

A short while later, his grandparents arrived. His brother looked very unhappy at being left behind, and was sitting in a corner, playing with his

necklace. Darth knelt down beside him.

"Hey, shortstuff, I can't bring back your kitten if I don't go first, can I?"

The reminder of his gift dispelled his gloom, and the little boy crowed happily and walked with his brother to the door. He stood with his parents and waved good-bye.

"See you later," Darth called, as the skimmer pulled away.

* * * *

He didn't, of course. 'Later' never came. Returning after an exciting day, the first thing he and his grandparents saw was the smoke. Then the people. A large contingent of law enforcers and three Jedi, one bearing the scarlet of a Master. It was she who approached the trio, as they landed. She took his grandparents aside to talk to them quietly, while fear slowly grew inside him.

Suddenly, his grandmother began to cry hysterically, screaming "my baby" over and over. His grandfather tried to comfort her, while tears streamed down his cheeks. The fear suddenly exploded and he began to run toward the smoking house. Hands grabbed him and lifted him high off the ground, despite his struggles.

"No, son, you don't want to go in there." The face behind the voice was gentle and sympathetic. Helplessly, he began to cry.

He never learned exactly what happened, except that jackbooters had raided the estate, killing both of his parents. Of his baby brother, there was no sign. No one was sure whether the jackbooters had taken him--and if so, why--or whether he had wandered into the Wilderness. They searched, but found nothing.

As he stood, watching them lower the bodies of his parents into the ground, he felt a coldness grow inside him, a coldness that would be there forever. It was always said that he had the Talent and would someday join the Jedi. Well, he would--and he would deal with people like those pirates.

But he would not hurt like this again. He would keep his heart to himself and give no one a special place in it.

Except one--and he vowed that he would find him and protect him, if he still lived.

* * * *

He realized his hand was closed tightly around the necklace, and he opened it quickly, afraid he might have damaged it. Those days had remained always a sunlit image in the darkness that was now his soul. For a while, he had wondered why his brother had never sought him out in later years, if he had survived, but the Jedi came to believe that the three-year-old child, faced with a horror beyond his comprehension, had blocked that entire portion of his life out of his memory.

He thought of Jabba the Hutt and felt a shadow fall across that glowing image in his mind's eye.

By the Force, no! Not that piece of vermin!

* * * *

The cruisers arrived at night. It was a small, out-of-the-way planet, without an Imperial base. No one was sure what Lord Vader wanted here, but, then, no one had had any idea what was going on for some time now. That raid on the outlaw operation, for example. Nobody special, why waste the time? Rumor had it that Vader had killed that outlaw chief himself, the same way he had disposed of Admiral Ozzel and Captain Needa. And their passenger, whom they had taken on board after the raid, well, word was it was the same Corellian Vader had given to the bounty hunter!

Curiosity was rife, but they knew it would never be satisfied. Even now, they were loading their passenger, still unconscious, into Vader's shuttle.

The Port Commander, stunned at the visit, tripped over himself to accommodate them, though he had a hard time facing the Dark Lord without gibbering. To his surprise, Vader asked for a hostelry; they had a passenger they wished to leave there. After receiving directions, the Dark Lord turned to the young lieutenant acting as shuttle commander and handed him a vidisc.

"Get that, and bring it to the hostel."

The lieutenant, flipping on the vidisc, stared in disbelief at the item listed there. Following Vader with his eyes, he wondered briefly if the Sith had all of his bearings, before hurrying off on his task.

Vader watched silently as they placed Han Solo on the lone bed in the room. The two boxes stood on a nearby table. In one was a voucher for 10,000

credits; it should be more than enough to get the Corellian anywhere he wished to go. This gesture would not endear Vader further to Palpatine, but that did not concern him now.

This was the one vow he'd made in his life that he would not break.

The hostel's owners, hovering nearby, inquired if there was anything else he required. Gesturing them away, he shook his head. Then, suddenly, he called them back. "I expect," he rumbled ominously, "that nothing left here will be touched."

Pale, they stammered an assent and fled the room, almost knocking the young lieutenant over. He teetered precariously, careful not to drop his package.

"You have it?" Vader asked.

"Yes, my Lord," the lieutenant replied, carefully handing his superior the object he was carrying. Saluting, he withdrew.

Vader moved to the bed and watched its occupant silently. Hesitantly, he reached out a hand and touched Solo's shoulder gently. Then, swiftly, he placed his purchase on the bed.

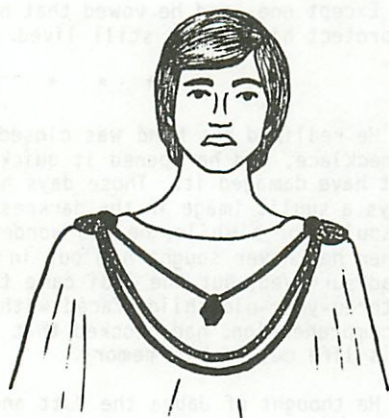
"A little late, Hannell."

Whirling, he strode from the room, hurrying, as if he could leave the past behind. But, for a moment, his ears were filled with the sound of childish laughter, his eyes, with a sunlit lawn, and his heart, with a long-dead warmth, before the darkness closed in once more.

And curled against Han Solo's body, a small kitten yawned and, purring contentedly, fell asleep.*



MANY BOTHANS DIED TO
BRING US THIS INFORMATION...



BUT NOT ENOUGH! ^{HEH}_{HEH}



A Cup of Kindness

What do you mean,
what's wrong with me?
Nothing.
What could be the matter?
I was rescued from Jabba almost immediately.
And with all my parts.
I've been back three weeks,
you're here,
Chewie's here,
Luke's gone back to his training,
the Falcon's still flying...
Who rescued me?
You keep asking that.
What difference does it make?
I got out;
that's all that counts, isn't it?
So I've been a bit distracted--
the enthusiasm of your welcome is enough
to distract anyone.
not to mention keeping one tired--
are you sure you want to throw that?
I'm fragile, you know.
What's not going to work?
I am not trying to get you off the topic.
I mean,
why should I?
I was rescued.
Period.
Will you quit bothering me?
I am NOT getting angry.
Anything would be fine if you'd just--
Damn.
Damn.
I'm sorry, Leia,
I didn't mean to yell.
I...I,
damn,
I just don't understand it myself.
Sometimes I think I know the reason,
but I can't remember it.

You know that kitten I came back with?
Well, he gave it to me.
What?
Oh...he who?
Vader.
Don't look at me like that,
I'm not crazy.
He's the one who rescued me.
Blew Jabba's outfit to pieces, too.
Then he deposited me on some small world.
Left me my things,
a voucher for ten thousand credits...
and the kitten.
Why?
I don't know why.
That's what's been driving me crazy.
I mean,
first he rips my guts out with that machine,
then he uses me like a lab animal,
and hands me over to Jabba.
And then he rescues me,
and treats me like a long-lost brother!
Brother...
Sometimes,
in the back of my memories...
ever since then,
I dream.
A dream that turns to smoke in the morning.
And in my dream,
I know the answer.
There's sunlight and people important to me
and laughter,
and darkness and death and fear.
And a kitten.
Something in my past I've lost when I'm awake.
He knows what it is;
he remembers.
Someday,
I will, too.

You know,
I think I'll keep the kitten.

Marcia Brin

SMOTE

Marisue Ford Fan

Amid protestations, Han finally allowed himself to be dragged off to sickbay. "Chewie and Lando know how to fly this ship just fine," Leia said sternly. "I know you want to kiss every inch of the Millennium Falcon, but you can just put that off a little while longer, hotshot!"

"But I'm all right," Han grumbled. "I feel fine!"

"What am I wearing?"

He leered at her. "Not much. That costume Jabba's idea?"

The princess ignored his question and the look determinedly. "But you can't make out the details, can you?"

"You've got a gold metallic fastener in your hair. Your...bra...is held up by a leather string that goes up around your neck." He stared at her frontage. "It's made of metal and leather, gold and brownish-purple. Covering your--"

She cut him off hastily. "All right, your eyesight has returned. I still want the medicomp to check you out!"

"All right, all right, all right. I'm comin', aren't I?"

Once in the small cabin that doubled up as bathroom and sickbay, Leia made Han bathe his eyes in a mild bacta solution. Spitting and swearing, the Corellian did so, then submitted to lying down on the bunk where the medicomp was located.

The princess called up Han's last physical readings, then activated the mediscanner. Readings started to come up on the comp's tiny blue screen. "Well, the medicomp thinks you're pretty healthy," she admitted. "Circulatory and respiratory system fine... That's odd."

He raised his head from the pillow. "What?"

She looked at him puzzledly. "According to your last record--taken shortly before we left Hoth--your weight's up."

"So?"

"But you were in hibernation. Your body should've had to use up some of its reserves of fat."

"I'm not fat!"

Leia glowered at him, then smiled. "I know you're not, flyboy. But you should have lost weight in carbon-freeze. Come to think of it..." Her look of puzzlement returned. "...You should have grown a beard while in hibernation, too. And your hair should be down to your shoulders." She giggled at the image that called up and his appalled look. "I think I would have liked to see you bearded."

"I'd look like some stupid Jedi--or some kind of religious nut--in a beard and long hair," he complained. "Who says I should've done anything in carbon-freeze?"

She frowned. "It's just a basic fact of hibernation. Your body was still alive, it had to fuel itself...your hair, and nails, would have kept growing..."

"You sound like some kind of med-droid." Han added sarcastically, "Obviously I gave myself a shave-and-a-haircut before I thawed out. Would you let me up off this bunk, Your Worship, now that you've assured yourself I'm okay?"

"Not only did you cut your hair, but you changed your clothes, too, I suppose!" She stared at him, wide-eyed, her gaze traveling from his face down the length of his form. "Your pants are brown now, but they were blue when you came out of the carbonite block! And you're wearing an undershirt now, but you didn't have one on before--I know because your shirt was plastered to your skin!"

"Oh, come on, sweetheart. You're just not remembering right."

The princess drew herself up and gave the Corellian one of her long-ago-perfected imperious looks. Haughtily, she declared, "Every second, from when we entered the carbon-freeze chamber to when Jabba's guards took you away, is engraved upon my

brain. One doesn't tend to forget the moment one says 'I love you' to a man who...who you might never see again." Her voice faltered toward the end.

"Whom," offered Han.

For an instant, it looked as if Leia might hit the supine Corellian. Then she composed herself. "Whom," she agreed demurely. "Thank you for correcting my grammar, Master Solo. The point is that I know."

"That's my line."

Given sufficient provocation, even a Princess of the Royal House of Alderaan will strike. One shapely hand lunged out and smote the Corellian a blow on the chest.

"Hey! I thought you were worried about my health!"

"It's your mouth I'm worried about, you--you--"

He grinned. "Nerfherder, I think it was."

"Stop trying to distract me, you idiot!" The princess gazed at Han with discomforting intensity. "You've got a lot to explain, Solo. You just made me remember that--just as you said 'I know'--that you were wearing a jacket over your shirt, Han...but the stormtroopers had taken that jacket off you when they went to bind your arms..."

"It gets cold in carbon-freeze?" he interjected hopefully.

"And you got rid of the binders on your arms, too!" she finished triumphantly.

He squirmed and tried not to look foolish. Unsuccessfully.

"I want an explanation."

"Yeah, well, sometimes I don't remember exactly right..." he mumbled.

"Han--!"

"You really want the truth, sweetheart?" She looked down at him like some small, but fierce, gargoyle. He sighed. "It's a long story..."

"We've got time. You're not going anywhere until you tell me."

"Well, it wasn't convenient for me to be in carbon-freeze for the last three years. I had people to see, banks to rob, you know...sorry, wrong persona. Spice to smuggle, I mean."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, I had to go be Indiana Jones again. And

Harrison Ford. I like him; he gets to play me in the movies. He's one of my best personae. Then there's all sorts of other people, all part of me, in other universes. Gotta keep things running smoothly, Princess, and I can't be in all places at one time."

"Han, you're talking gibberish."

"No, I'm not! There're several billion universes. I can't keep them all running okay by myself, so I created personae. Psychic clones. Pieces of me to go to other universes and keep them in order."

"You think that's an explanation for everything?" Leia glanced at the medcomp. "I think I'd better have this check over your neural patterns."

"Every so often I have to cross universes and make sure my team is doing its job," he explained patiently. "When I finally came back--well--I forgot a couple details, like the blue pants. So I just--improvised. But you're not supposed to notice things like that."

"I'm not supposed to notice things like that," she repeated dazedly. "You can cross from one universe to another? You've got the Force?"

He laughed. "That's one way of putting it. Actually, I am the Force."

She gaped at him. She looked uncertainly from him to the medcomp and back. Then her gaze riveted on his face, and disbelieving, exasperated amusement gave way slowly to belief, and, yes, horror. "You--you--"

"Me what?" he inquired, grinning arrogantly.

Horror became loathing. "Manipulator!"

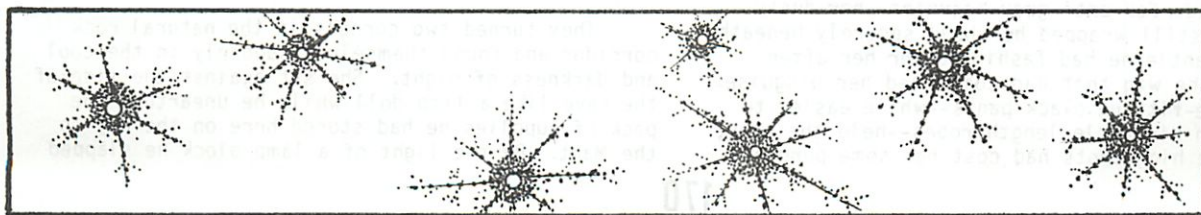
"But everything'll come out all right," Han said. "For some people, anyway. I have to keep a low profile, though." He looked sharply at her and saw that she wasn't about to be convinced. In the same matter-of-fact tone of voice, he continued, "Of course, you won't remember anything that I've said."

She blinked. "Won't remember," she agreed expressionlessly. And blinked again.

"None of those--paradoxes--will occur to you again, Princess." He watched her blink and nod her head. "Everything's normal. We're all fine here, right?"

"Right." She blinked a few more times. That made thirty-seven in all, by his count. She wouldn't remember a thing.

Sighing, Han Solo laid back and contemplated the order of the cosmos. Being the Secret Master Of The Universes certainly was difficult sometimes. ✨



Leia: I don't know what you're talking about!

Han: Probably don't!

Leia: And what's that supposed to mean?

Han: C'mon! You want me to stay because of the way you feel about me!

ENTRACTE

JEAN L. STEVENSON

(Dreams of the first interval to warm the prisoner of the second interval.)

PART I

The Badlands baked under a morning glare. He had seen the Jundland on Tatooine, had more than once piloted a spacecraft through the star void that surrounded Kessel, but even his memories of this place had not lived down to the reality. Stripes flowed over the sand, dazzling the eye, fooling the brain into thoughts of rivers, side by side, cool, hot, dead; the copper of oxidized iron particles, the glittering specks of obsidian from a long dead volcano, a strange purple blotch where the minerals from a hot sulphur pool interacted with whatever was in the sand. It all had a terrible beauty when viewed from above, but Han Solo cast one look over his shoulder and saw only the anomalies--three white-clad bodies moving steadily across the plain far below.

His breath came in great gasps, his knees wobbled dangerously, and his feet--unused to scorching sand after years in boots rather than sandals--were numb and swollen beneath their dusty cover. His eyes hurt from the glare already, although the sun had topped the mountains only a few minutes ago. But when he had catalogued his own discomforts, he turned with renewed worry to his companion.

The small, boy-garbed figure leaned wearily against him, uncaring of what or who might be her support. She had tied the sleeves of her black jacket around her waist, and--thank all the gods of all the worlds for anti-grav hairpins--her dusty dark braids still wrapped her head securely beneath the white mantle he had fashioned for her after discarding the wig that had completed her disguise. But the loose-fitting black pants--while easier to move in than his ankle length robes--held the heat; and the knee high boots had cost her some purchase

in their scrambling flight, tiring her more. And she was such a little thing.

"Leia."

She stood straighter, away from his protective arm, and turned blindly toward the slope.

"No, wait. They're stopping." Vaguely, he felt her warmth against him once more as he strained to see what their pursuers were doing. "They've found our camp. Did we leave any water?"

Her head butted softly against his chest in a negative.

"Well, they're settling in. You don't know them. They could get enough moisture out of a damp rag to travel for days."

Finally--knowing they could be seen but also that no one would try to move across the Badlands once the sun rose much higher--he turned and gently coaxed her to continue climbing.

"C'mon. The cave's up here. Remember the cave? It'll be cool--" Relatively so, and he hoped nothing and no one else would have chosen it as a place out of the sun. "And we'll have water. You can wash your face. That's it! Just a few steps more."

They turned two corners in the natural rock corridor and found themselves suddenly in the cool and darkness of night. She sat against the side of the cave like a limp doll while he unearthed the pack of supplies he had stored here on the way to the Mant. By the light of a lamp block he slapped



into place on a rock, he moistened a corner of his robe and gently wiped her face and neck, fending off her flailing protest at the cold touch of what was, in fact, warm water. And he trickled some from the canteen into her mouth.

"No, honey. Not too much. That's it. Later you can have more."

She started to shiver then, and after much persuasion, he got her arms into the sleeves of the jacket and fastened it closely around her.

By then, his own body--incompletely insulated by the robes--had begun to react to the temperature extremes to which he had subjected it. Quickly, he cleaned his face, holding a mouthful of water until it was warm enough to swallow. At last, he sat down beside her and pulled her onto his lap, wrapping his heavy outer garment about them both for warmth.

"How did I get into this?" he mumbled as his head fell back against the wall, the protective he had forgotten slipping to his shoulders. "How the hell did I--?"

Raucous laughter rang through the wardroom on the rebel base, echoing in a space designed for hundreds that now held only ten people frozen in the center. Two more stood in the doorway.

One--massive, furred, a walking weapon among the much smaller humans--blinked curiously at the tableau while his companion, human but possessed of no less lethal an aura, leaned his black-and-white clad frame casually against the wall, arms crossed, dark brown head tilted inquiringly, his eyes hidden in the shadow of his brow. Laughter lingered in the upward tilt of one corner of the well-shaped mouth.

At last, the group came back to life.

"What are you doing here? How did you get in?" one demanded, and as she stepped forward, her bearing made her the greatest of them rather than the least, in spite of her youth. "Well, since you're here, come in and close the door! And lock it again!"

Silently, they obeyed, the human facing his interrogator with a sweeping bow after he had dealt with the locking mechanism. "Don't get upset, Princess. I'll be happy to answer your questions. Why are we here? We're hungry, and I believe we're still entitled to some of your Alliance's precious supplies. How did we get in? Well, I'm afraid that's a state secret."

"What state?" she returned, her eyes widening in astonishment.

"Why, the excellent state of my health and Chewie's freedom, of course. You never know when such knowledge might be helpful...or incriminating." His gaze raked the ten: six men in the uniform of the Rebel Alliance; two in civilian clothing that stamped them as very rich indeed; the princess in her never-changing, white and flowing robe; and a well built, open-faced young man with brown-blond hair and startlingly blue eyes. This last was wearing white robes also, three layers of clothing that got heavier as they got farther from

his skin. As the newcomer came forward, the laughter disappeared completely from his eyes. "So, how 'bout a little explanation, Your Highness? What's going on?"

She primed her lips and stepped back so that she didn't have to tilt her head too far to look into his face. "Captain Solo, we are--we were working on a vital part of Alliance strategy. Vitally secret!" she emphasized. "Do you want food? I'll get you food!"

"Why, Leia, I didn't know you could cook!" he drawled, grinning.

"I can't!" she snapped. "You'll get cold meat sandwiches."

"Thanks. That sounds good." Followed by his huge, silent companion, he swaggered to a nearby table, and sat down before looking up at her expectantly.

She let out an incoherent exclamation that was nonetheless eloquent with frustration and disgust.

"I'll take care of it, Your Highness," one of the officers said quickly, a glint of amusement in his eyes for the performance.

"No, don't, General," she vetoed, continuing with a poisonous smile for Solo. "I'll be happy to serve the captain. All of you, wait for me." She glanced at the white-robed young man. "And don't talk."

Nervous surprise dominated his expression as he, too, tore his gaze from Solo. "I won't. . .if you say so, Princess."

She nodded decisively and pivoted, heading for the darkened kitchen area.

"So, Luke!" Han offered conversationally, studying the younger man's garb intently. "What's this I hear about you becoming a Manton?"

The princess stopped in her tracks and whirled to face him, a spot of fury blazing in each dimpled cheek. The officers and civilians directed their gazes to various interesting places on the ceiling and the floor. Luke started to answer, glanced over his shoulder at the young woman in dismay, and then turned back to the seated man.

But she got in the first and last word. "Don't talk!"

Visibly unhappy, Luke subsided and refused to meet Solo's mocking look as she left the room. Han exchanged a warning glance with the great Wookiee, and regarded all the others with a jaundiced eye. And silence reigned in the room until Leia returned.

She slapped a disposable dish down between the man and his furred friend and then stepped back, hands on hips, boot toe tapping as she waited for them to finish.

"This is very good!" Solo commented after the first bite, in spite of the fact his stomach churned with the tension in the room. "Chewie, how's yours?"

A noncommittal grunt was the only reply.

Solo shook his head dolefully. "You're just going to have to learn how to cook for Wookiees, Princess."

"I have no intention of doing any such thing!" She looked as if she hadn't wanted to answer but the words emerged anyway. "I thought you two greedy hotshots were going! Wasn't the medal ceremony big enough? Do you want more money?"

But he had just taken a bite, and the chewing of it continued for some length of time while he pondered the answer. Finally, he swallowed. "No."

"Then you'll forgive my lack of hospitality, I'm sure, Captain, but I must ask you to leave. After all, we are evacuating this base. You should be terrified."

With a sigh, he put down the remainder of his sandwich and leaned back to look up at her. "Nice smoke screen, Your Worship, but it doesn't work. The kid's dressed up as a Manton. All the high brass is here. You are here. . .working on secret strategy. Even my weak brain can add the facts together. You're going to send Luke somewhere where he's supposed to act like one of the crazier religious fanatics in the galaxy. You're using him because he's brand new. His face isn't known outside Tatooine. Of course, he's never seen a Manton, so all of you folks got together to teach him how to act like one. Am I right so far?"

He could see the answer in her face, but the same general as before stepped forward to make it official. "Astutely reasoned."

"Thanks," Solo returned coldly. "Now the only question is: where are you sending him? To court? I bet that's the only place you've seen one of the monks. To some backwater spaceport?" His open palm slapped the table, just missing his plate, causing all of them to jump. "Did it ever occur to you that I might have seen Mantons and would know quite a bit about how they act around my kind of people?"

The princess looked down in consternation and then faced him again, her chin jutting forward at direct odds with his. "Not quite, Captain."

He frowned. "Well, that's the full gamut of where you'll find a Manton, sister. The only other place you could be sending him. . .is. . . ." The dawn of understanding blanked his mind. Then, as genuine horror spilled in, he surged up and out of the chair to stand over her, his fingers digging into her shoulders until she winced. "You can't! Not even you would be so. . . ." He couldn't think of a suitable word and glanced over at young Luke. "Kid, are they trying to send you to Ord Mantell?"

The other nodded. "To the Mant. Han, I know how to act. They taught me everything!"

A white fury seemed to have wrapped itself around Solo's brain and he glared once more at the girl under his hands. "To the Mant. For what?"

She licked her lips and took a deep, shaking breath as if only now realizing that she might be in danger. "Reports say a TIE-fighter went down near the monastery. The pilot was taken in. We need a

positive ID and-- and to get the records from his ship."

"One measly fighter pilot?" Solo demanded, biting out the words.

But she shook her head. "Not just a fighter pilot. Darth Vader."

Instantly, he released her, muttering, "You're crazy."

"Now do you understand?" she went on. "If Darth Vader is alive, we must know. He alone could delay our advances for years. This is the only way we can find out for sure!"

Solo only looked at her. "You're crazy!"

A haunted look came to her. "Perhaps. But this is our plan. It is the only one we have."

He inhaled, began to speak, and looked over his shoulder at Chewbacca. Then he came back to her. "So you're gonna risk my friend. . .and the fair-haired boy of the Alliance in a half-witted--"

"Do you want to volunteer?" she interrupted sweetly.

A shadow passed over Skywalker's face, and Solo looked at him appraisingly. Maybe the kid would be good enough. Maybe.

"Well, Luke, let's see you walk through your paces."

Skywalker grinned then and straightened up, fingering his robes. "This is my juran, this the ob-juran, and the outside cloak is the parob. I am a Man of Peace, dedicated to spreading the joy of the Force to all the worlds of the galaxy."

As the kid continued, Solo nodded absently once or twice, listening to the tone in the voice. Luke sounded more eager to have something to do for these folks than really sure of what he was saying. Or he was eager to be able to do it for Princess Leia. Either was deadly where he was going.

"Yeah, yeah," Solo interrupted. "But try this. There's a fistful of generals and civilians over there. Go join their group. Greet each properly and sell them on the Peace of the Universe. But first, what weapons are they wearing?"

All of those indicated drew themselves to ragged order, and one of the officers started to speak.

"No," Solo commanded, ignoring the affronted look he received in response. "Luke, you tell me. Without even looking at them. You've been in this room for how long tonight? You should have had plenty of time to catalog every single thing in it, including what they're wearing." But he could tell from the bewildered frown Skywalker turned on him that such was not the case. A heavy feeling boiled deeper in his gut. "Then let's make it easy. You're walking down the street. I'm coming from this direction. We'll meet just about there," he directed, pointing to a spot some eight feet from each of them on intersecting courses. "Don't say anything. Just do it."

With right hand on the holstered blaster slung low on his right leg, Solo sauntered forward, watching the younger man out of the corner of his eye. Luke crossed his arms lightly, stuffing his hands into the long sleeves of his parob, and head high, gaze serene, came to meet him. Han lengthened his stride; Luke paused just long enough to let him go first and then proceeded along his original path. Han slowed to a stop and watched as the kid looked for the reaction from his teachers. Their approval was apparently universal.

"So," Solo remarked quietly. "You feel pretty good, huh?"

Skywalker nodded with a small grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"I gotta admit you've got the walk and the look real good," the older man said, continuing in that conversational, easy rumble. "And anybody really can spout nonsense about if we all lay down our arms together and pray to the Force, then everything will work out all right. But if you expect to go into the Mant like that--" Smoothly, without apparent action, the blaster was in his hand, covering Luke steadily. "--then you're dead. Just as surely as if I pulled the trigger right now. You're dead."

"Unh-unh, General." Solo flicked a warning glance at the one who had moved. "You see, Luke, he was the only one armed, besides me and Chewie. And I guess Leia's still carrying that little knife inside her left boot." The princess' jaw dropped with shock, and he grinned at her. "A Manton knows these things, from personal experience or observation."

The group had frozen once more and they stayed that way as he collected Chewbacca with a glance and made his way to the door, still keeping Skywalker under the threat of the weapon. He paused then, a sick feeling joining the weight that burdened his heart and stomach. What if Luke went ahead and did it anyway?

"Look, kid, you never ever let an armed man cross in front of you. It's not a challenge; it's a matter of pride. A man of Peace must go first. And no Manton can re-enter the monastery--at all!--without bringing a young boy as his protege. And once you get inside those walls, everything they taught you about a Manton on the outside ceases to exist. It's meaningless. It's the way they act outside." With a savage movement, he reholstered the blaster and directed a challenging look at Leia. "You get the robes made to my size. I figure I've got half a head and twenty weight measures on the kid. Then you find me a youngster...and I mean young! Somebody who hasn't started shaving yet. Have him bring the costume to the Millennium Falcon no later than tomorrow morning--early! I'll go for you. Come on, Chewie!"

"Captain Solo!"

He paused without looking back.

"Don't you want to ask for payment?" came sweet-voiced from behind him.

Abruptly, forgetting the presence of the others, he turned and advanced on her, irrationally pleased when she backed away, startled. And deep in

her gaze was an expression he'd seen disappear too early from his own eyes but that Luke still had, a look that denied her claim to full adulthood. He began to envy the man who would waken the woman some day, and his tone grew harder. "What I want for this, Your Glory, nobody can pay. Especially not you."

A murmur of protest swept the watchers. She blinked and frowned away her obvious confusion. "Well, how do you know so much about the Mantons that with the dangers involved you are willing to go?"

"Because I was in the Mant." He swallowed bile. "As a novice."

Her big eyes got even bigger. Solo glanced at the others with a mocking grin and sauntered back to join Chewie at the door. He put a casual hand on the lock and, as efficiently and silently as they had come, they left.

"I should've said no when you showed up the next morning," he grumbled as he helped her down the last drop off the other side of the mountain from the cave where they had sheltered during the day.

"I was the only one available," she countered. "Just like you. Are they still coming?"

He looked over her head to the ridge where three figures were limned against the stars and black of night. "They won't give up easily. And you wouldn't have been the only one if everybody else hadn't evacuated on your orders. Come on."

"Look, we got what we came for, didn't we?" she offered, trudging beside him through the slippery sand. "We'll be safe at the Falcon by morning, and you got your blaster back at the cave. If necessary, you can take care of them long before they catch up."

He looked down at her in some sarcasm and no little dismay. "Bloodthirsty little thing, aren't you? Why would I want to hurt them? After all, they're Men of Peace."

"Hmph!" Her head came up a bit as though she tried to make herself taller, but she still couldn't top his shoulder. "You needn't keep reminding me how much I didn't know about the Mantons. I have never been so appalled in my life!"

"And such a long life, too," he murmured.

"Oh, you--!" she sputtered. "I've seen what the Empire does to subject peoples. I'm personally acquainted with Darth Vader! But such a warping as these Men of Peace practice on innocent young minds--! Do you know that Brother Peelot kept me standing in one place for five hours while he lectured me on the state of perfect union? Union with what is what I want to know!"

His grip tightened on his blaster as he remembered his horror when he returned from his part of the mission--robbing Vader's ship. In the small, bare room assigned to him and his protege, he had found her in exhausted sleep on the floor, the marks of tears on her face. Until now neither of them had

spoken of it: he wished he'd known the cause before they left. She might be tough, but the Mantons had been breaking strong kids for centuries. And he hated to think what would have happened had they discovered because of the punishment that she was a girl.

"Do you know one of the novices had to stand on one foot for three hours the first day we were there?" she demanded. "And one boy was black and blue from a beating. And--"

"Leia, I don't want to hear about it!" His voice cracked high and he stomped forward, leaving her behind. But soon she was trotting breathlessly beside him once more.

"I'm sorry. I forgot. Of course, you know." She was silent for several minutes. "Please... could you slow down? I-- my feet hurt."

Realizing the kind of torment she must be feeling if she would complain so directly, he jolted to a stop. She overshot him, and he grabbed her arm to steady her as she sought her balance. When they set off again, he kept it slow--and damn the pursuing monks! He did have the blaster.

"You know, Han," she said hesitantly after a while. "You said you had been a novice, but you never told me how you got there, much less how you escaped--although I can certainly understand why you wanted to get out."

He closed his eyes and swallowed the memories her words conjured.

"I'm not prying," she said softly when he didn't answer. "It's just that... knowing what I do now, I don't understand."

"I grew up on Kashykk." The words--said for the first time to another human--came easily, without conscious volition, and amazed, he glanced down at her before looking at the spread of stars overhead. Ord Mantell had no moon. "With Chewie's family."

"You did?" She sounded completely awed.

"Yeah. Now there's a people that can talk about peace as far as I'm concerned." The slow tale continued to flow as if cleansing water washed a dry riverbed. "Anyway, a Manton happened to notice me with the other cubs and decided it was wrong for a human kid to be so close to those ferocious creatures. I think they called it 'contamination.' So, for my own good, he rescued me. Kidnapped is more like it." And his nightmares had echoed with loneliness and terror and parting and harshness where he had for so long known only gentle chiding and love.

He cleared his throat. "Then to make sure I was switched into the proper human path, he brought me here to be a Manton. You saw those kids. Some choose to go there and they thrive. Others are sold by their parents. The monks lose a lot of them to the desert training and the discipline. I was there about four years. I almost went crazy. But then came the big test. We were supposed to live off the land for five days. I knew there was a city in this direction and just took off. Three weeks. Stowed away on a freighter and headed back to Kashykk. That's all."

"All," she echoed faintly.

He waited, his mental processes a little limp, for her to go on and winced as he began to realize just how much he had said. In the few days he had known her, Leia Organa had with astonishing ease managed to prick his long-dead conscience more than the once that had brought him back to Ord Mantell. With the material of his early life to hand, she could probably make him truly miserable. Well, he and Chewie would just have to leave as soon as he got her back to her Alliance.

As only the rustling silence of their passage answered him, for now, however, he gradually relaxed a little, frowning as he gained a shadow that began to move along the ground in front of and with him. He glanced over his shoulder at the bright pulsing star that had topped the mountain ridge. Ord Mantell had no moon--only a faint second sun. The three figures had disappeared, but he knew they would still be following.

"Han, there's another ship up there!"

Automatically, he picked up the pace as he turned back around and squinted toward the **Millennium Falcon**. Sure enough, the nose of some small craft was visible just beyond the outline of his freighter. And now he could see the other vessel--low to the sand--in the clearance between the surface and the bottom of his much larger ship. And two figures moved into view, standing dwarfed by the **Falcon**.

He shifted his hold on the blaster to hide it in his wide sleeve. They wouldn't have been able to get into the freighter without blowing themselves to pieces unless they were very skilled indeed. He wished now that he could have brought Chewie, too, just to wait here. But they had agreed that the power expenditure necessary to support the Wookiee against the desert climate would simply attract sensor attention from any nosy Imperial in the vicinity.

The sun rose higher, casting less heat and light than the nearstar.

"Captain Solo," said a shaky 'Princess' voice beside him. "Do you know who they are or... or anything?"

"Nope," he replied steadily, glancing down at her. "Leia, when I tell you to, I want you to faint. Don't make it too artistic. Just fold up. And stay down. You hear? Don't move--at all!--until I tell you to."

"And how am I supposed to tell you from them? The whisper of sweet nothings in my ear?" she demanded.

"That's a good idea!" he replied sharply. "Ready? Now!"

For a minute he thought she would protest, but their agreement on his command authority before beginning this venture had been explicit. She hit the ground and lay still as he bent over her, patting at her arms and legs with his free hand, trying to give the impression that he was at a loss as to her injury. Then he looked toward the two waiting figures and waved.

"Stay here," he told her softly, just to make sure, and stumbled to his feet, heading for the ships at a run. As soon as he came within shouting distance, he began to call. "Help!! Oh, please. . .!"

The figures did not move, and finally, he rocked to a stop before them. They both held blaster type weapons, and he put a touch of droid-like obsequiousness into his tone for good measure. "Oh, friends, you can see the novice is ill. . . will you help us? He is--"

Manton, have you seen the owner of this ship?

It was a variant of the Sirandoc language of the Tion Hegemony. Han blinked, shook his head automatically--he never answered questions like that, especially said in that tone--and opened his mouth to plead with them again.

Manton, I don't want to hear your sniveling voice again, the first one said harshly. *Nod side to side for yes. Up and down for no. Do you understand?*

He almost got it wrong but managed to reply correctly, beginning to understand quite a bit indeed. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was having one of Luke Skywalker's "bad" feelings about what was to come.

The second one held out a cheap block holo that was still fresh enough to hold the image clearly. *This man is called Han Solo. This is his ship. Have you see him? Think first!*

Obedying that injunction willingly, he tried to keep his breathing even and then nodded up and down vigorously. Which reminded him of his hood. Which had fallen back as he ran. Which left his face in plain view.

Casually, one of the hunters looked past him to the approximate place where Leia was.

"Now, brothers," Solo began, backing away one step, the perfect picture of abject fear--he hoped. "I have a lesson of peace to teach you. Why do you search for this man? You should seek the inner guidance--"

Cease! One of the blasters came to wave under his nose. *Or I will be inner guided to shoot that one.*

Han froze as the weapon was aimed at Leia.

But the one with the holo struck up his partner's arm. *There is bounty offered, Manton. Many credits. We will share.*

"I see." He did: that debt to Jabba the Hutt. "Well, I'm afraid you're not going to find what you seek here, brothers."

They stiffened, looking past him. *It moved. Shoot it.*

The sound of the weapon echoed inside the great hollow of his mind. The butt of his blaster slipped neatly into his palm. They swung toward him--and halted mid-motion.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not sure you're ever going to finger credits again," he told them through stiff lips. "You should never underestimate your opponent, boys. I don't see Han Solo unless I look in a mirror. And now. . .I'm mad."

Mad? The chaos inside him defied classification under any mortal emotion.

If you shoot him, Solo, I will still get you.

"Maybe. You could just put your weapons down--"

He never knew what tipped him. A blink of the eyes, a breath too deep, a slight elevation of one weapon. He fell to his right. The air where he had been screamed with death. He took out the one who had fired and shifted his blaster to his left hand in mid-air. The second hunter took too long to realize where the target had gone. It was a clear shot.

Then Han was floundering on the sand, his feet caught in the skirts of his robes, trying desperately to get the bounty hunters in view once more. But he needn't have worried.

He headed for Leia at a dead run and dropped to his knees beside her. There was a burnt spot on the sand by her right arm but no blood. She was breathing.

Once he had recovered his own breath--and sight and hearing and heartbeat--he leaned toward her, pulling aside the mantle to get to her ear. "I thought I told you to remain absolutely still."

Her head came up to survey the fallen foe. Then with a speed he wouldn't have imagined possible after traveling in this land for three days, she sat up.

"Hey, you didn't wait for my sweet nothings!" he protested.

A savage glare pinned him in place, and she ripped at the button holding shut the V-shaped opening of her shirt. Turning a little away from him, she thrust a hand inside, and after a moment's struggle, a look of unutterable relief suffused her face. The hand reappeared, tossed something to the sand.

"It bit me!"

"Wait!" He dove for the spot where the creature had landed. A little mangled but alive, the kimrim scuttled away as he untangled his feet and turned back. "It's not poisonous. You'll be okay."

But the fury in her glance did not abate.

"C'mon. Let's get to the ship," he suggested with what he hoped was a placating smile; and it seemed that a gleam of lighter humor appeared in her eyes for a moment. "You'll feel better after a shower and a change of clothes."

Without looking directly at him, she refused his offer of a hand up and stalked toward the entrance to the ship, detouring widely around the corpses. He keyed the ramp for her, collected the holo poster and the weapons that had belonged to the

bounty hunters, and at last followed her into real comfort.

Safety. The peace of hyperspace. The exquisite joy of no more sand, no more heat, no more robes to flap around his ankles and trip him at the worst moment. Han settled back into his command chair in the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon* and rubbed his hands along his thighs, appreciating the feel of his own clothes, black pants, white shirt, knee high boots and black jacket. It was still a little cold in the ship in comparison to the desert they had just left.

He glanced over at the right-hand seat where Chewie usually sat. His companion also looked a great deal better after the application of soap and water and the resumption of her gracefully flowing gown. Her hair, that he had glimpsed a while back--down and squeaky clean--was once more coiled efficiently about the crown of her head. The ruddy touch of the sun had colored the bridge of her nose and her cheeks. But there were new and deeper hollows beneath those classic bones, new shadows in the wine-dark eyes. She looked much older than the girl who had showed up in the Alliance hangar to astonish his just-awake mind with a mischievous copy of his own garb. Ord Mantell had taken its toll of her.

In her lap she held the recorder from Vader's ship; he wondered how the Sith lord would feel when he discovered it was gone. But in one hand she balanced the holo poster the bounty hunters had used. Her thumb pressed one corner and a message lighted up along one side. WANTED FOR DELINQUENCY OF PAYMENT: HUMAN OF COREL, and so on and so forth. The picture was good.

Shaking his head, he faced forward again, frowning with a deep-seated confusion.

"What's the matter, Captain Solo?"

He grimaced at her formality, but answered anyway. "I can't figure it."

"What?"

"Those two," he mused aloud. "They had me. I was right in front of them. Nothing hiding my face. They could have winged me long before I got the drop on them. But...but it's like they didn't recognize me at all!"

A gurgle of laughter escaped her and changed into a full-fledged laugh as he turned an indignant glare on her.

"Captain Solo, you obviously don't look in a mirror very often."

"What's that supposed to mean, Your Worship?"

"Well, just that I know why they didn't recognize you."

"So? Why?"

"Well, first, they weren't expecting a Manton to pull a blaster," she said sweetly. "Everyone knows how peaceful they are."

"I figured that one out myself. But my face--!"

"Captain, do you remember when we were trying to get out of the Mant unnoticed and that monk called you--?"

"I remember. I remember!" After all his assurances that he was the only person who could get in and out safely because he'd been there. He'd been there, all right, but he'd forgotten that monks he had known might recognize him. He didn't know why Brother Peelot had waited until the last minute to blow the whistle. He only hoped Leia hadn't heard the old man.

"I heard what he said. Sunchild."

He felt the color rising in his cheeks and gritted his teeth. "So?"

"It's just that in the desert you..." she floundered helplessly and then firmed her voice, holding up the holo. "The bounty hunters were expecting this man. He's got dark hair and dark eyes and a not very distinctive face."

"Thanks."

"But right now, your hair is gold. It's sort of reddish here in the ship, but out in the sun, it--" She sighed hugely. "And I can't tell from one minute to the next what color your eyes are. You might as well have been a shape-changer for all they could recognize you from this poster. Sunchild."

He frowned again and ran a hand self-consciously through his hair, trying for a minute to see his eyes in the reflection of lights on the viewport shield. If she called him that in front of Luke or Chewie or...or anybody he knew! But how could he get dear, sweet, sharp-tongued Princess Leia off course?

He turned to her with grim determination. "Look, Your Worship--"

She flounced in the chair irritably. "Don't you ever stop?"

"Stop what?"

"Very well," she began, her voice fairly reeking with outraged diplomacy. "I shall contrive to forget the name, Sunchild, if you will please limit your remarks about my rank and title to...to private moments."

"Oh!" he breathed, filling every word with sincere, well-learned innocence. "You mean like now?"

She sighed. "Yes. Exactly."

"I guess I could do that, Your Highnessness. Chewie and I aren't going to stay for long anyway."

"Well, that's a relief," she said primly.

"Look, you don't have to sound so eager to see us go!"

She blinked rapidly, a faint dimple appearing in one cheek. "Do you want to stay?"



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"No!" he bellowed, monumentally bewildered by the fury of his own reaction. "Besides, I've got to go pay Jabba."

"Well, then. . .!" She shrugged and folded her hands over the items in her lap. "There's nothing more to say."

He glanced at her and grimaced before returning his attention to the controls.

Princesses, renegade military officers and starry-eyed idealists had joined together in an Alliance against a powerful organization of men and machines whose ruthlessness and thorough nature he had known first-hand, to his regret. Just as well he and Chewie were going. It was dangerous for sensible folk to get mixed up in all this. If anybody else had been able to do the job on Ord Mantell, Han Solo certainly wouldn't have gone!

'I was the only one. . . .'

As Leia's words came back to him, he realized she had once more set off a turmoil within him. The thought of leaving--getting in the ship with Chewie and flying away--should have had his heart and mind spinning with plans for tomorrow. Instead, he thought of staying. . . and there was a warm kind of feeling just sitting there waiting for him to notice it, the kind of feeling he usually only got with Chewie or the family.

He frowned again, searching for the cause. He felt good about getting himself and Leia in and out of the Mant. . . and under Vader's nose, too. Of course, the Jedi had been unconscious. The monks would probably tell him about the two of them when he woke up. But they still thought she was a boy. Solo grinned, wishing that somehow, impossibly, he could have safely told them their sacred, pure ground had been walked upon by a woman--girl--woman.

He inhaled at that mental confusion and scowled

at a row of lighted buttons peacefully minding their own business on the console before him. Amber, green, an occasional white or blue, the reds in a distinct and familiar pattern, amber, green, gold. . . He sensed Leia's gaze on him and turned to her, questioning.

There was an older person watching him from her eyes.

The warm feeling bloomed as he realized: if she couldn't tell what color his eyes were, that meant she'd been watching him! As he sat, intrigued by the thought, another astonishment overtook him. What if he and Chewie didn't leave. . . well, not immediately?

Slowly, he sank back against the comfortable chair, crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her until she felt it and turned an imperious gaze on him.

He grinned. "You know, I was getting pretty envious of that bug."

"Envious? Why?"

"Oh, just because!"

She frowned, but that new person inside her kept her watching him.

"Think about it, Princess. Just think about it."

The new person understood. As her gaze fell before his, she blushed lightly and shifted in the seat, turning outward once more. Idly, he rubbed a finger along the arm of his chair, over the rim of the control panel in front of him, tracing the row of amber lights. 'I wonder if a princess and a guy like me. . .?' That warm feeling answered him, and he smiled. Maybe. Maybe this time he'd found something good, like Chewie had. Maybe.

PART II

A fire crackled in its bed of stone and spread its warmth, enveloping the family seated around it in a golden glow that reflected the near-tangible feelings created by the recent celebration. Outside the ring of light, cold and darkness lay heavily on this Highest Plateau of Kashykk where a hundred more fires flickered like stars. Standing stones marched in blind patterns across the level expanse, providing windbreaks and privacy where desired. And overhead, a glittering canopy of stars moved with slow majesty through the middle hours of night.

The songs of the Woodfolk--a large, fiercely gentle people, furred and fanged and possessed of a keen humor and a love of beauty--had at last died to a mere hum. Occasionally, a sleepy youngling would raise a protest and be promptly shushed. Against that background, two soft, human voices stood out clearly, and Han Solo looked around the fire at the family and his two young guests.

Chewbacca and his mate sat close to one another, his darker, black-tipped fur setting off the silky red-brown of Malla's coloring. Their

son Lumpy--a nickname, since most Wookiee names stretched human tongue and vocal chords beyond reason--lay curled beside his grandfather, Itchy, and two pairs of matching blue eyes stared sleepily into the fire, one framed by white, the other by the golden shades of youth. All of them wore the deep red robes of the Life Day Celebration.

One other at their fire wore red, and with a wary ease Solo found his gaze returning to its most constant focus this night. A princess she was, and the soft white hood-collar of her own gown framed her face and fell in graceful folds on the shoulders of the robe Malla had loaned her. It was one Solo had worn the last time he had celebrated Life Day as a child of the family. In the light of the fire Princess Leia Organa might have been made of flame herself, a deep, eternal source of warmth and joy.

The watcher scowled and blushed a little at his own thought, then deliberately followed her laughing glance to the last of their company. This was a man, lately a boy, with hair burned to fairness by the heat of twin suns and with eyes that matched the

Sky Morning robe he wore. But as he talked animatedly, odd shadows appeared over his features, cast by the fire and the angle from which Solo viewed him, and the ceremonial garment--so vibrant when lit by day--had faded to silver-blue and shadow now. Glancing at the man sitting opposite him, Luke Skywalker smiled and leaned over to whisper to the girl, who listened for a moment and then shook her head, no.

"Well, I will," he said, his voice alternating uncertainly between a whisper and a louder tone. He cocked his head and grinned at Solo. "Say, Han. If you're a Corellian, how come you grew up on Kashykk?"

The older man's scowl deepened, and he cast a swift look to Chewbacca and Malla. Both returned it silently, and at last, he shrugged and faced Luke. "Who says I'm Corellian?"

"Well, aren't you?" Skywalker replied. "That's what that 'wanted' poster you brought back from Ord Mantell said. And I heard General Dodonna telling that new guy, Rieekan, how crazy you fly the **Millennium Falcon**, and Rieekan said you must be Corellian . . . 'cause they're the best crazy pilots in the galaxy."

Solo just growled, "Shouldn't believe everything you hear, kid."

"But--!" Skywalker began and looked to the princess.

She smiled hesitantly and turned to Han with an air of faint apology. "But Captain Solo, in my not inconsiderable experience in this galaxy, I have learned that Corellians do have certain distinguishing characteristics."

He threw her a look of mocking challenge. "Such as?"

"Well, size for one thing. Bigness. And . . . changeable eyes."

With a helpless laugh that held a note of bitterness, Solo spread his arms wide and looked up at the stars for assistance that didn't come. "Listen, Your Tinyness. Chewie looks big to me. I look big to you. That doesn't prove a thing. And I wish you'd st--" He clamped his teeth shut over the hesitation and glared at her defiantly. "My eyes are brown. My hair is brown. I ain't a Corellian."

Only One, Chewbacca interrupted sternly. *Speak correctly, as you have been taught. And tell them what you know.*

"Aw, Chewie!" Solo returned as both Skywalker and the princess looked to him in bewilderment.

They are your friends, Only One, Malla spoke, soft-voiced in the night. *And you have brought them here for Life Day.*

"What did they say, Han?" Luke demanded.

But Solo's gaze went first to Leia. "They just think I should tell you. See, the ship I was on crashed here, way down in the Nother World. Chewie happened to be out and about and figured he'd see if he could help anybody. Well, they were all dead

'cept me. So he grabbed me up under one arm and headed for the treetops, me kicking and screaming all the way." He flicked a glance at the rapt Skywalker. "The scavengers were already moving in. And . . . and they never could find the ship again. So you see? I'm not Corellian!"

"Well, there's no need to be belligerent about it," the princess said evenly. "That only proves you could be just about anything, including Corellian. But it doesn't make much difference to us, you know."

"Yeah. We still like you," Luke said, chuckling.

Solo heard him from a distance. He had a stinging retort ready, but his words faded beneath her gaze. It was a look to still the breath and stir the blood, that gaze. Her hood had fallen away from thick, sable-colored hair, and in the girlish features with their firelight glow, there dwelt a hint of promise, the promise of the woman to come, the woman he had glimpsed only briefly once before. But that single moment had changed his patterns for this time. It had led him to seek counsel of Chewie; and it had in the course of events brought this girl-soon-to-be-woman here, to Kashykk, to his first and only home.

Now her gaze fell away from his, a blush rising to her cheeks.

Luke laughed softly, and Han looked at him, feeling the heat in his own face. Skywalker seemed not to have noticed.

"How old were you, Han?" he asked eagerly. "I mean, when it crashed."

"I was old enough to tell them my name," Solo replied with a grimace. "And I was housebroken."

The adult Wookiees laughed, and Luke and Leia choked and stared at him. As Han pretended to ignore them, Lumpy spoke up.

You were littler than I was when I was born, Only One.

"Just about the same size, Lumpy," Solo answered, leaning over to run a rough-loving palm over the youngling's head. Then he straightened to fix Luke with a no-nonsense look. "Why did you want to know?"

Skywalker fidgeted beneath that level gaze. "Well, it just reminds me of the stories my Aunt Beru used to tell me when I was little, all about wizards and knights and princes. There was one, I remember, about twin boys who went to a strange planet with their parents. They got left behind for some reason and were brought up by the ferocious natives, and they turned out to be princes who built a great empire!"

He finished on a high note and surveyed his audience with a mischievous grin. "Don't you see, Han? You could be a prince! And then Leia would have to call you 'Your Highness!'"

Oh, that's funny! Lumpy shouted--only to be immediately shushed by the adults--and he fell to giggling.

Han grinned sympathetically at the youngster, understanding the absurdity that called for laughter--also realizing the unpleasantness such an impossible eventuality could occasion. All it spelled to him was the image of Leia giving back to him every jibing remark he had ever made to Her Worship.

But Leia's reaction-- He would have expected indignation, a sharp-witted remark of the sort that sometimes made Han feel he was Lumpy's age again. Instead, deep within that intent, knowing gaze he had met before, a sense of surprised recognition had been born. And as he watched, frowning speculation replaced it for just a second before she moved her head sharply to escape his regard, reverting to the young princess he had first met.

Luke broke the silence once more. "Well, you are wearing the right color, Han! Kings and queens and emperors always wear gold."

Han snorted in disgust and looked down at himself. Malla had given him one of Chewie's robes from long ago, and that color that so delighted Skywalker made Solo's uneasiness return--but on a different score. Gold for princes and kings. Hah! It would take more than a color, more than mere money to get him to be a king!

That kind of folk always took on more responsibility than one person could handle, and then people wondered why they went a little crazy. Why, look at Leia! One of these days she'd freeze into a Royalty altogether and mere people like spacers who didn't know where they came from would have to bow down for real--not just in teasing.

And what was her reward? The right to sleep in a hard ship's bunk, always on the run? To eat stuff that would never be seen in a palace? To stand alone--or practically so--a woman-child growing older but not warmer among men/soldiers/boys... smugglers? To watch your world be blown to bits? It hadn't taken him long to figure out that Alderaan's destruction had been partly for her benefit, although to his knowledge, she had never said a word to anyone about it.

He watched her gather herself together. She did have a pretty smile, and a nice way of talking to the family.

"Malla, I'm afraid we must be going. There is always more work to be done." She rose gracefully and they all followed her lead. "Thank you so much for inviting us to share Life Day with your people."

Thank you for your gift of song, Star Woman, Malla replied. *We are happy that our Only One brought you to us.*

"Uh... she thanks you for the song," Han translated gruffly.

"You're welcome." Leia smiled at the Woodfolk and shrugged out of her borrowed robe, her own white gown shining in the night. "I hope we'll be invited to return sometime soon. And I want you to know how grateful we are that Chewie is helping us."

"Yes," Luke added, folding his robe neatly and placing it by the fire. "He's been a big help."

The entire family remained silent, drawing

closer to one another. Han exchanged a glance with Itchy.

"Okay, kids, take off," Solo commanded, shedding his own robe and taking a sneaking delight in the way Leia's eyes widened at his choice of words. "Luke, do you remember the way to the ship? Okay. And if you get lost, I'll be right behind you."

The two young humans moved into the night, their footsteps becoming muffled after only a few minutes. Finally, Han stepped up to Itchy and offered hand-greeting. The eldest Wookiee accepted, exerting a little pressure on the more fragile human hands.

Take care, Only One. The trees are high and all below is danger.

"I'll do that, Itchy. Hey, Lumpy! Anything you want me to get for you offworld?"

The youngest seemed to hesitate and then grinned. *I want a space ship like yours, Only One.*

Solo laughed. "I'll see what I can get to Trader Sonn Dan. You know, it's amazing what a network this Alliance has. You keep watch for a package from me, Little Brother."

Lumpy nodded as Han rumbled his head fur. But Solo could feel the tension in Malla, and he turned to her with an apology ready on his lips. She was strong with Chewie gone, but she'd much rather have her mate with her, Han knew, and he was the one who kept Chewie away. The apology died as she pulled him into a careful hug. He gave himself to the warmth for a minute and then stepped back.

"Malla, I--thanks for welcoming my friends."

Slowly, she tilted her head to one side and grinned down at him quizzically. *Is there not something else you would ask me, Only One?*

He inhaled sharply and glared at his friend, brother and copilot. "Chewie, have you been shooting off your mouth again?"

Yes, Brother. It seems you need more than a little help to carry out this particular effort.

Hmph, snorted Itchy. *I can remember when you were courting Malla, First Son. You needed help, too.*

Han grinned at Chewie. Then the grin faded, and with another deep breath he looked at Malla. "What do you think of her?"

She nodded slowly. *Your Star Woman has much heart, Only One, and she wants to share it... share it much. But I think that among your people she is very young... as well as being older than her time. She will be a worthy mate... if she grows. Watch her well. Help her. Entice her heart with songs and with gifts. This is the way of the Woodfolk in love, and if you love, it will be your way.*

He felt a blush rolling up from his toes and grinned sheepishly at her. "But Malla, I can't sing!"

She laughed. *Neither can Chewbacca! But when he spoke, my heart heard the music. So it must always be. Only One, you must try.*

"Yeah," he replied absently, and then realized he was scuffing the toe of his boot over the hard rock surface. He stilled the motion and took a last look at the whole family. "Chewie, I'll delay as long as I can. Take your time. There's no knowing when we'll be able to get back. And . . .well, 'bye, everybody."

Farewell, Only One! they chorused.

Quickly, he strode into the darkness, following the path taken by Luke and Leia, and when he thought of Malla's words, it was as if daylight surrounded him. He came to the edge of the Highest Plateau and plunged without thought into the downward trail which led to the next level ground and the Falcon. And ahead of him now, he could see the other two feeling their way through the night.

When he finally caught up to them, they had paused and were staring up at the sky.

"I don't know," Luke was saying. "I can't tell where anything is."

"What're you looking for, kid?" Solo asked, and he noticed the swiftly concealed movement of Leia's head as she first heard his voice.

"Tatooine," Skywalker answered. "But I don't recognize the constellations here. What's that?"

Han glanced up and his breath caught at the night's beauty. In the velvet blackness above them, a familiar band of stars stretched from horizon to horizon, growing thicker as it reached the top of its curve, brightening to a sharp brilliance. He looked back at the others.

"That's what you were talking about a few minutes ago, kid. The Core of the Galaxy. Where stars are born. Kashykk is the only place--only habitable place you can see it from like this."

"Oh," murmured Luke, his gaze still turned upward.

A pale wraith in the starlight, Leia turned to Solo, and it was as if she had touched him. Instinctively, he moved a little closer. She moved. He followed. And they might have been alone.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Leia?"

He thought at first she wasn't going to answer.

"Yes. I like Chewie's family." She paused, still facing him. "Your family. Don't you have a human family, Han?"

"Nope." It was his turn to hesitate, to search for the words. "That was a pretty song. Where's it from?"

"I wrote it."

"You did?" His voice cracked high and he cleared his throat. "When-- I mean, you wrote it just for Life Day?"

She looked away. "No. I . . .when I was younger. But . . .but from what you described to us on the way here, I thought it would be an appropriate gift."

"It was. Malla really liked it." He inhaled deeply. "She likes you, too."

"Really?" She sounded pleased and shy.

"Really."

Silence held between them for a minute while she seemed to think about it. Then a stiff wind swept over them. Shivering, she turned toward the downward trail. "I don't know about you two, but I'm cold. And we don't have much time. We need to get back to the Alliance."

Remembering his promise to the Wookiees, Han unobtrusively positioned himself to block Luke's move to follow her. "Well, sure, Leia. Where are we going this time?"

She stopped and retraced her steps. "The Council has chosen a proper site for a base."

"Yes, but where?" he insisted, as the wind backed on itself, carrying Chewie's distinctive scent to him.

"When we're in flight," she said firmly, "I'll give you the coordinates."

"Oh, excuse me, Your Worship!"

He heard her sharply indrawn breath as he passed her, leading the way to the Falcon.

An uncomfortable silence held until they boarded the ship and started a pre-flight checkup. Even then conversation was minimal. At last Chewbacca appeared in the door to the cockpit, and both of the youngsters looked up at the somber Wookiee. If they had had anything to say, however, they left it unsaid. Han gave his copilot a wry, sympathetic grin, and within minutes they had left the fire-flecked Highest Plateau and the Woodfolk far behind and were in the air, heading for the stars.

Finally, Solo gave the controls to Chewbacca and turned to the young woman in the seat cater-cornered to his command chair. He just looked at her for a moment, thinking of all she was, all she represented, and he could feel muscles and nerves that had relaxed in the warmth of Life Day beginning to tighten again. She returned his gaze steadily.

"Well?" he demanded as the silence threatened to reveal his heartbeat. "Where are we going?"

She stiffened and shifted those revealing brown eyes to another focus. . . the back of Chewie's head. "To the Hoth system."

The Wookiee growled in surprise, and Han glanced at him before turning his attention back to Leia.

"Hoth? You wanna go to the Hoth system? What for? There's nothing there but--"

"You have been there?" she inquired, flashing an unfathomable glance at him.

"Yeah."

"Then you should realize where the base will be."

In the chair behind Han, Luke looked from one to the other of them in bewilderment. "Where is this Hoth system? What's wrong with it?"

"It's out in the middle of nowhere, and on the only habitable planet, the polar ice caps meet at the equator!"

"Essentially correct," Leia said regally.

Han just stared at her. "Not even outlaws stay there, Your Worship! It's too cold! Your machinery'll freeze up. Your people will get sick. You can't go out on the surface at night. What kind of base can you have there?"

"A secret one," she returned as though explaining to a child. "You don't have to stay after all."

"I guess we don't, Sweetheart. Not now," he growled, turning back around to call up the coordinates for Hoth from the navicomputer.

But she wasn't finished. "What do you mean?"

Take care, Only One. Or you may destroy that which you wish to grow.

Flashing a quelling glance at Chewie, Han looked at her over his shoulder. "Listen, Your Worship, we're businessmen. There has to be cash flow in as well as cash flow out. Otherwise, the Falcon can't fly and we can't eat. It's simple. And if the rebellion doesn't want us to work for

them, we'll go!"

"Wait!" Luke said then, his voice sharp, almost angry. "Han, you can't just go. . .not like that!"

"Why not?" Solo set the controls and pulled a lever, and the ship slipped neatly into hyperspace. "I don't like being cold."

"Oh!" Leia cried. "And does everything have to be easy and warm for you to agree to do it?"

Abruptly, he whirled his chair around on its swivel mount. "Nothing's easy, Sweetheart." This time he saw her eyes when he used that word, and his blood pounded in his ears. 'Entice her heart. . .' But his mouth kept going--as if it were suddenly a self-regulating adjunct to his body. "It helps to have a little something to look forward to."

"Oh, yes," she murmured scornfully. "I forgot how oriented you were to the reward concept. Please be assured that if the Alliance asks you to do something, you will be properly reimbursed and . . .and salaried."

"Thank you!" Han replied, pointedly courteous. He held her gaze for another minute. "But you haven't even heard my terms."

She sat straighter and looked at the back of Chewie's head again. "I'm sure we can meet them."

It sounded like a businessman's dream--guarantee of payment without discussion of terms.

Han grinned at her and turned back to the console. "I hope you can, Princess. I certainly hope you can."

PART III

The common room of the **Millennium Falcon**, a medium-sized, multiple personnel freighter that had been born in the Core several human lifetimes ago, displayed the ship's age but wore those years lightly due to the loving efforts of her current owner. The term shipshape might have been invented to describe the unencumbered appearance of grated decking, neatly dogged tools and magne-seal cabinets--all in readiness for immediate takeoff if necessary. She might look prettier with a new color job and refurbished seat covers at the banquettes and table, and in her youth carpeting had cushioned the floor. But stripped for active duty--and by the slender nature of her owner's credit account--the Corellian freighter could afford to sneer at others her age who had been refinished to a brilliant gleam by casual owners but who still had to strain to pass lightspeed. The **Falcon** and those who flew her gave off a subtle, indefinable air of purpose and internal strength.

At the moment, the deck held its own under a good pounding from a young man with light brown hair who wore the butternut gray fatigues of the pseudo military Rebel Alliance Forces. Energy sword up-raised, he danced and dodged away from the infernally accurate strike beams of a Remote Arms Practice Sphere. The RAPS had been set to seek and sting anything that moved in the room and at a skill level

designed to challenge Luke Skywalker's growing ease with the lightsaber. Only a few minutes of exercise had already brought perspiration to his brow.

Lounging in the acceleration chair beside the auxiliary control deck, a more casually dressed man carefully raised one hand to touch his own forehead, then as cautiously--to keep from attracting the attention of the sphere--lowered the hand once more to run loving fingers over the smooth leather holster strapped to his right thigh. Just to watch the kid's efforts made it seem warmer to Han Solo; but that wasn't necessarily bad. Each day the temperature on board the freighter inched closer to that of the air in the hangar outside where the walls had been laser carved from permanently frozen ice. So far, the **Falcon's** emergency life support had been able to maintain a kind of warmth against that encroachment, but in another couple of days, Solo figured, he would have to start wearing two sets of thermals and gloves inside the ship.

Of course, if this Rebel Alliance to restore the Old Republic--he snorted at the high-sounding words--would just find a mission that needed doing, something only a top-notch spacer and his Wookiee copilot could accomplish, then he'd be able to fire up the main drives, get some real heat circulating and, not incidentally, get off this ice cube of a

planet. Instead, here they sat, eating into their profits--still a couple of thousand short of the amount he owed Jabba the Hutt--because he had taken on other missions for this Alliance where he had had to waste fuel and weapons charges evading Imperial bulldogs. And when he wasn't sitting, he was stumbling around in the frozen air of Hoth, his fingers and toes tingling all the time, helping Chewie to fix some of the minor faults in the **Millennium Falcon**--anything major was repaired at once--or watching silly rebels doing silly things.

Like practicing lightsaber duels.

He scowled fiercely. There was the day he had come upon a makeshift corral where four humans--damn efficient folks when it came to computers or droids--were trying to convince one Hoth native to allow them to put a saddle on its back. More, they then intended to ride the thing! After a short while, during which the two-legged lizard had successfully thwarted the four and almost mashed one of them into the hard ice, Solo found himself inside the corral, flapping his arms and dancing back and forth to attract the tauntaun's attention while the three remaining rebels got their leader out in one piece. Not knowing what else to do, Han started talking to the creature the way he did with Chewie when the Wookiee got too angry to think straight. Chewie even plied the same tactic when Han occasionally suffered a similar malady. And it had worked fine for the tauntaun.

The scowl deepened. One time he and Chewie had walked into a full-scale battle in the noncoms' wardroom. Was it his fault that Chewbacca got hit accidentally and waded in? Or that the two of them had mopped up? It was just a silly brawl over a woman who didn't want either of the combatants. So Han had knocked their heads together verbally, said if he heard of them bothering her again, he'd have Chewie take care of them personally, and recommended they learn how to tell if their feelings were reciprocated before making fools of themselves.

Something inside him tightened to a near unbearable strain. That was the problem. It was easy to tell somebody else: learn how to know what the woman of your choice wants. It was harder to do: Solo had been trying just that for the seemingly interminable time the **Millennium Falcon** had been sitting in this freezer unit.

A communication signal buzzed from the cockpit, but deep in his disgruntled analysis of life, he ignored the summons. It buzzed again, telling him Chewbacca had gone outside, probably to look for something else to take apart and check for flaws before putting it back together. Buzz.

With an explosive sigh, he jumped to his feet and stomped toward the archway leading from the room. Heard Luke's startled cry. Hurling himself down and over for a single snap shot at the practice ball that zoomed toward him. The instrument took the blaster bolt on its shield and absorbed the energy, then obeyed his hand signal, sinking to the deck, quiescent.

Luke stared at him, slack-jawed.

The communicator buzzed again.

Pleased his reflexes still held true, Han

climbed to his feet, holstered his blaster and headed for the cockpit with Skywalker scrambling close behind.

"Han, that was incredible! You're good! If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe--!"

Solo shut him up with a quick gesture and leaned over the speaker grille set into the control console. "What do you want?"

"Captain Solo?" a neuter voice replied hesitantly. "This is Base Control."

"So?"

"Message from General Rieekan as follows. Coming out of council. Have another proposal. Are you interested? See me then. End of message. Do you copy, **Falcon**?"

Han stood straighter, excitement washing through his mind and body. "This is **Millennium Falcon**. I copy, Control." He paused but had to say it. "Anything else?"

"Negative, **Millennium Falcon**. Control, out."

He grimaced and acknowledged the close of communications, only too aware of the disappointment that soured his momentary rush of glee. Why had he asked? He hadn't seen or talked to her since--too long.

"Han?" Skywalker's puzzled frown was directed to the saber hilt that he turned in his hands. "You're so rude to them. To everybody."

"I answered 'em, didn't I?" Solo countered, taking refuge in sloppy language. "Besides, I ain't an officer or a gentleman. I got no time for fancy protocol."

The other looked up, his expression clearing. "I understand. . . I guess. You are who you are, and we shouldn't try to force you to be what you aren't."

It was said with such solemnity that Han--who agreed wholeheartedly--began to grin. "Where'd you get that one, kid? Or did you think of it all on your own?"

"Oh, no. Leia--I mean, the princess told me just yesterday that you--"

"You talked to her about me?" Solo demanded, all his inner conflicts returning full strength while an insane glow warmed his insides.

"Well, sure!" Luke turned to head back into the common room, talking over his shoulder. "You're our friend. And if I haven't seen you for a while, she tells me what you've been doing."

Solo's head came up as he followed the younger man. So she told Luke what he, Han, had been doing! How would she know. . . unless she had been watching him with a great deal more success than he had had even seeing her?!

"When we heard you had figured out how to ride a tauntaun," Skywalker continued, "and you know, everybody came out to watch--"

Yes, he knew--would never forget walking silently from the corral, through the laughing congratulations of the crowd, and into the hangar to the Falcon. He wasn't a farmer, a grounder. Whatever worked was what you did. That's all. But what was Luke saying?

"And when Dodonna said you were a disruptive factor, she turned around and told him that since you had accomplished a very necessary thing where the project had been stalled for some time, that you were hardly disruptive. And then--"

"Wait a minute. You mean, she...you were both in that crowd that day?"

"Yes. And I told her about the fight in the wardroom. Sorry, but I didn't know she didn't know until after I told her. And she knows I visit you and Chewie a lot." Bending over to retrieve the practice sphere, Skywalker paused and looked at Solo from that upside down angle. "Funny. I never see her out here."

Ignoring the comment with great determination, Han paced deliberately over to the auxiliary station and tapped the cover of the chronometer there. Of course, it was working. He'd just fixed it, hadn't he? "I'd better go. Rieekan will be waiting."

"You've got time yet. I wonder if he's going to offer you that commission."

Solo froze in the archway and turned slowly to look at Skywalker. The kid had tossed the remote into the air where it scooted up and down on air jets, waiting for him to activate his saber. He looked over in surprise at Han's rumbling, deadly inquiry.

"What commission?"

"You mean you don't know? The Council is really anxious to have you made an officer so you won't decide to up and leave. But Leia and Rieekan both think it's a bad idea. He says--"

"It certainly is!" With a swiftness of movement even the RAPS couldn't track, he turned and was gone.

Solo hit the switch that opened the Falcon's main ramp and stood tapping one booted toe against the metal deckplates as he waited for the mechanism to follow its safety routine. He pounded down to the hangar floor and took off at a hard pace toward the command center. Belatedly, he realized he should have put on another jacket, but then he was inside the smaller, more self-contained portion of the base, and the ambient temperature rose just enough to protect exposed hands and faces. He threw a glance in the direction of the bare heating pipes suspended from the ice ceiling of the corridor, and scowled.

On ice. That's what they all were. The rebellion hadn't done anything or gone anywhere for some time because Darth Vader hadn't been killed with the Death Star. Some rationale. Typical committee gibberish. Han Solo hadn't gone anywhere because he hadn't seen Princess, Her Royal Highnessness, Leia Organa of Alderaan since she and Luke had visited Kashykk for Life Day.

He bounced off the opposite wall going around a corner, and slowed his pace a trifle, but his thoughts remained on course. Maybe her Princess-ship had had second thoughts about a smuggler and down-on-his-luck freighter pilot who had no connections at court and wouldn't do the 'proper' thing with them if he did. She had sure put this relationship--what relationship?--right in the deep freeze. He could almost hear her voice, the deep musical tones that called forth songs in him.

"Han," she would say, with simple reason. "Let it wait. The rebellion must have first priority. There is so much to be done."

And Han Solo's heart had begun to freeze. But he wouldn't let it. He wouldn't let her. . . .

Rounding one more corner, he skidded to a halt, his heart not frozen at all.

Facing away from him, she stood about twenty feet away. A slender, feminine figure in a white snowsuit uniform, her braid-wrapped head nodding gracefully as she talked to General Rieekan.

The much taller man, laughter in his eyes, glanced over her head to Solo. "I quite agree, Your Highness. He is a natural leader."

"I just keep hoping--" she began, turning to follow his gaze. Her eyes widened, seemed to flash with a moment's fire, and then were quickly shuttered. She turned back. "Excuse me, General. I--"

"Well, Your Highness!" Han called, forcing himself to a casual approach as she slowly faced him once more. Her eyes were huge, new shadows painted like bruises under them, her cheekbones more prominent than before. She looked older. Beautiful. Wasn't she sleeping well? He hadn't been for a long time. Because of her. "It's good to see you again."

A light flush colored her cheeks, and when he looked down, she had lifted one hand toward him. He took it. Warm. Not an ice princess at all. He remembered Malla's advice; but he and Leia usually came to blows when they talked. On impulse, he bent--she was so tiny!--and brought her hand to his lips, kissed her fingers softly, and straightened, flushed with his accomplishment.

She flicked a gaze to left and right, reminding him of Rieekan's presence, and gently tugged her hand free. She opened her mouth, but apparently thought better of what she would say. In silence, she turned and left.

Facing the general's quizzical, humorous study, Solo stuck his chin out a little.

With a faint shake of his head, Rieekan grinned and sighed. "Glad to see you, Captain. You got my message, I take it?"

Dazed by the lack of comment on what had just passed, Han waited for him to mention the commission, waited for the chance to say no.

"The Council is very concerned about the amount of ammunition we don't have," said Rieekan pensively, leading the way into the orderly chaos of the command center. "They have at last agreed to a

plan. It's dangerous. But I think it would fit your peculiar talents perfectly."

Solo blinked, still off-balance, and nodded.

"Now, I want you to understand, Captain, that this is a high risk mission I'm proposing." He paused, facing Han squarely. "We have worked out a schedule for one ship with a commando crew to go back to Yavin, to the fourth moon, and retrieve the contents of several munitions caches we had to leave behind after the Death Star attack. We don't know what kind of Imperial activity you would meet. We suspect the presence of a battleship at best by now. And of course, we'd appreciate it if you didn't lead them back here."

"Of course," Solo murmured, drawing a wry grin from the older man.

"We're prepared to pay the usual...with a risk bonus this time. What do you think?"

Han shrugged. "When?"

"As soon as you can be ready."

"No training for your commandos?"

Speculation colored Rieekan's measuring gaze, and Solo tried to look as though the details of military procedure were far from his ken.

"No," the general answered slowly. "Everybody does at least two jobs around here anyway. The leaders of the team both worked on the crews that hid the stuff originally, and we're going to pinpoint the locations on a world-grid for you. That should give you an edge for a straight in-out run."

"It should." Han thought for a minute and then shot a level glance at Rieekan. "You've got other ships that could do this. They've got the speed and the jump capability."

"True. However, no one else can quite equal your...inventiveness in flight."

Solo looked away and shrugged off the compliment--if that was what it was. Something still felt wrong. "But you wouldn't have to pay the others. They're working for room and board and the chance for a brighter future!"

The general answered warily, as if treading on the flimsiest of surfaces. "But they don't need the...work."

Han shot a hard look at him and turned toward the exit. "I'll think about it, General. Let you know before the day's over."

"By the way, Captain Solo," Rieekan said quietly, stopping him before he had gone far, "I wanted to thank you for breaking up that fight the other day. It's hard to avoid such occurrences under these conditions, but if any of the civilian councillors had heard of it, we would have had trouble keeping them from imposing heavy fines on the two men. Your intervention was invaluable, your solution to the problem inspired. That's all."

With a curt nod, Han stepped into the corridor, heading back for the ice hangar, but before he had

gone far, he had to stop in a concealed niche and lean his head against the wall. He fought for breath as his heart pounded inside his chest; he fought against the sting of tears behind his eyes, disappointment and anger roiling in his blood.

They wanted him gone. They wanted it so badly they would use this excuse to pay him off, get him off their tails, get him out of her life. She wanted him gone. That was bottom line.

Voices approached, and instinctively, he turned his face into the shadow, knowing the dark blue jacket and pants would hide him from casual sight. Two voices: one male, one...Leia.

"...And General Rieekan thinks Captain Solo will be best for the job."

The man snorted. "I don't know why that pirate doesn't just leave."

"He is not a pirate!"

"Smuggler, then."

They had passed the niche, but then the man stopped, his back to Solo, hiding the diminutive woman from view.

"Han Solo may not talk about it, Seguire, but he believes in this rebellion as much as you or I."

She sounded very regal, so much so that the listener almost missed the meaning of her words. Then it sunk in, and as conflict ripped through him once more, he shook his head. He believed in his luck--sometimes--and his ship and his friend. Well, maybe Luke, too. But Her Worship sounded like... she didn't sound like she wanted to get rid of him. And apparently Seguire agreed.

"Well, of course, you would defend him!"

"What do you mean?" answered Leia after a moment, and her tone was one of genuine bewilderment.

The man laughed softly, and Solo's hands clenched into fists that he wanted to mash in the other's face.

"Princess, we all know how you feel about him. Now, I say this for your own good, my dear. You're not old enough to hide the signs. But it is natural enough, after all. Even my wife tells me that the captain is a handsome man, but..."

"But what?" Leia prompted, her "royal" voice matching the hardness of the ice-walls of the tunnel.

"Just remember his history, his...profession, shall we say?"

Seguire brushed past her, and Solo caught a glimpse of her wide-eyed, astonished gaze as she turned to gaze after the man. "Seguire. I trust Captain Solo."

He paused and inclined his head but did not turn around. "Yes, Your Highness. That's the problem."

Leia stood where she was, and her whisper

echoed softly in the small space that encompassed the two of them.

"But I do trust him. I do!"

Han's boots crunched on the ice, and she whirled to face him. As she registered who it was, where he had come from, and what he had probably heard, a deep red blush rose to her cheeks. And that older knowledge--of woman, of man--looked out of her eyes where the little girl still sat in fear.

"Leia--?"

She turned and bolted. After a moment's flabbergasted attempt to think, he started after her, all his past confusion melting away as joy bubbled through his heart and body, everywhere that blood could run. She wanted him to stay! Oh, she might not know why herself yet. Seguire had told her, but Han could tell she hadn't really understood. . . hadn't wanted to understand. . . hadn't wanted to believe. She would, though. She would. And soon. . . .

He skidded to a halt, slamming into the far wall of a T-shaped intersection as he looked right and left. He had lost her. She had lost him. But not for long.

He would go pay off Jabba. Rieekan was right about that, and the money for this new mission would take the **Millennium Falcon** into a profit margin. Not much, but some. And once he was free of the bounty, he could work for a bigger stake. The Alliance looked like they were planning to go places now. He'd go with them. Oh, not as a member; but they knew he did good work. Rieekan trusted him.

She trusted him. She had said so.

Grinning irrepressibly at the thought, he clapped his hands together and set off toward the hangar. He'd stick around, only this time he wouldn't sit back. No, sir. Rieekan had said not a word as Solo kissed her hand. That was practically a go-ahead--from a general, no less.

Emerging from the corridor into the huge ice chamber, he was met by what might have been a solid wall of cold air and increased his speed. He raced up the entry ramp and stood huddled in the relative warmth of the ship, his chest heaving as he caught his breath.

"Chewie? Luke?"

A growl from the common room informed him that Skywalker had put away his toys and headed for duty time at the inflight battle simulator.

"Good. We've got work to do."

When he slid into his command seat in the cockpit, the Wookiee was close behind him, settling into place on his right.

"Let's run a DRB check in five minutes. I want 90 percent. Then we'll do it again for 95 percent. And if she can't deliver, we're gonna freeze here. Go."

Unquestioning for now, Chewbacca immediately began an equipment rundown on his side of the board.

Han reached for the communication toggles before him.

"Base Control, this is **Millennium Falcon**."

The same wary voice answered. "This is Base Control. Go ahead, **Millennium Falcon**."

"Is Rieekan still there? I've got a message for him."

In a minute the older officer's voice came through. "Have you thought enough, Solo?"

"It never takes me long, General. We're beginning our departure checks now. How soon can you have your commandos on board?"

"Within the hour. They'll bring the location schematic with them."

"Thank you. And now if you would be so kind as to have your people clear us for takeoff, that's all."

"They're working on it. We'll have a corridor when you need it. Good luck."

"This is **Millennium Falcon**. Out."

He sat back, took a deep breath, and before making his own check, gave one last thought to his newly formulated plans. When that promised woman within Leia came to be, he wanted to be here--anywhere--with her.

* *

Savage, hammer blows of pick against long-frozen ice. Exertion. Muscle strain. Anger feeding the false strength that kept him going. He knew he would feel it all later when the warmth generated by activity had cooled. For now, he just swung the pick and tried not to think, to feel, above all to avoid remembering dreams.

Near him, but downwind, the tauntaun he had named Bela lifted her head and muffled into the air. Glancing at her, he put the pick to one side and took up the guide marker lying beside the hole he had dug. When he had unfolded the device and inserted the base leg into the hole, only a small, ice-covered mound showed, but that would soon be concealed by more ice and snow. The transmitter inside, however, would--for the next several eons of this planet's life--send out short, local codes to anyone who could hear and who needed to be guided through this wasteland of white.

White. He closed his eyes, ruthlessly banishing that image of soft fabric that contrasted so completely with these harsh surroundings. Successful for the moment, he gathered together his tools and stomped over to the tauntaun to stow them in the saddle bags. The beast shied once, but he just slapped it on the rump and it settled down again.

A bitter grin came to the strong, brown features; a glittering humor touched the bleak grey eyes. Perhaps he should have tried that on Her Wonderfulness! Somebody should have given her one or two swats in the place it would do most good long before this. Hell, he'd hardly gone through a day of his life without Itchy or Chewie or even Malla

landing a loving blow to some portion of his hide. It hadn't been until he was grown and gone from Kashykk that he realized how carefully calculated and gentle those hands had been.

And other loving hands had touched him since.

He paused, reins in hand, one foot in the stirrup, and then quickly freed himself as the tauntaun shifted in place, threatening to pull him off balance. His eyes lit with a newer, happy gleam as the memory he had fought so hard flowed into focus.

The trip to Yavin had been every bit as hazardous as Rieekan suspected, even though the Imperial battleship didn't show up until the raiders were close to completing their tasks. Flying one-handed, with Chewie handling the bulk of the ship's systems, Solo had managed to out-manuever the enemy long enough to make the jump to hyperspace and then take stock. The holds of the freighter carried the contents of all but one of the ammo dumps. The deck in the living area was littered with injured humans and damaged cargo droids. And Han himself had one arm in a sling and a gash along his right ribs, injuries bad enough to take him to the base medics once they had reached Hoth.

* *

The medicenter at the rebel base had a large, open area where triage would take place during battle and which had served as an outpatient clinic until now. A sound-insulated window separated it from the intensive care section where Solo, trapped with his arm up to the shoulder in a healer, was afforded an excellent view as Princess Leia Organa hurried into the center. She rocked to a halt, her gaze running swiftly over the few rebel commandos sitting or standing in the outer area, those whose wounds had not been serious enough to put them to bed. Then she saw Han and slowly walked toward the inner room, some indefinable tautness fading from her as a tentative smile lit her eyes and softened her mouth.

An electronic beep from Two-One-Bee, the chief healer droid, signaled the end of Solo's treatment, and he pulled his arm free, quickly tugging his shirt into place, running one hand through his hair, conscious of the smoke still smudging his face and clothes.

She seemed unaware of it, however, as she came near. One hand reached hesitantly for him, and he squeezed her fingers in his reassuringly.

"Hey!" he whispered. "I'm okay."

She swallowed visibly. "I heard. . . . What happened?"

A kaleidoscope of images flashed through his mind, and he shrugged, flushing a little. "I'm just the pilot, remember? Ask your soldiers for a report."

She glanced through the window--where all could see them--and blushing furiously, turned abruptly to the door again. In the

outer room, all the men and women from the raid had managed to revert to expressions of only mild intelligence, alert and informed, but really not at all interested in their Alderaani princess and the man who followed her into their midst.

Leia paused infinitesimally and then approached the leader who sat propped against pillows on an examining table. "Lynor? Can you tell me?"

Lynor straightened, wincing, and flicked a glance at Solo. "Yes, Your Highness. The imperials must have had a trip marker set to note any ship moving near the Yavin moon. They destroyed the last dump just as we got there. We were on the ground, some of us outside. Captain Solo rounded us up, made sure everybody was on board--including the cargo droids--and brought us home."

A silence followed, and Han woke from some kind of trance to find Leia's hand on his arm. She didn't seem to know she was touching him, but he could tell all the others had noticed.

"How many times does this make that you've saved not only lives but other things of value to the Alliance?"

It took him a minute to realize she was talking to him, and an involuntary chuckle welled within him at her solemnity. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe ten. . . twenty. . . I stopped counting."

Her fingers tightened on his sleeve as she looked up at him. "And don't you think the Alliance is worth it now?"

"Hey, whoa! Back up!" he replied quickly, taking his own advice and then regretting it as her gaze dropped to her hand and it was swiftly pulled behind her. The place she had touched--warm from the contact--chilled. This time he reached for her, but stopped just short of the invisible barrier she had suddenly raised. "Listen, Princess. I may not think the Alliance is worth it, but I can think of quite a few other things that would make your rebellion much more attractive to me. For instance, when I go see General Rieekan in a couple of hours, he's going to--"

"Give you your pay," she said in a voice from which the softness was rapidly vanishing. "I know."

He straightened abruptly, dropping his hand to his side as the old disappointment grew in her eyes. "Yeah. That and other things. I have ideas about going out and getting myself and my friend and my ship shot to pieces just to get you and your generals some more ammunition to kill other people. You've got to understand, Sweetheart. That takes a lot out of a man."

Now, astonishment and hurt accompanied the flaming of her cheeks. "Oh, I'm sure you were quite a hero, Captain. Well, let me tell you. We don't need heroes! We need

people who are willing to work and to be honest about it."

"And I'm being honest!" he shot back.

"Oh, yes! You've done a lot for us in the last few months. But it's also cost us money and materials that we didn't have. And why? Because a certain Captain Solo can't stand making a quiet little pickup or delivery of goods. Imperials seem to follow him--or maybe he goes looking for trouble? Grandstanders we don't need, Captain. So you'll have to go and seek glory someplace else!"

Blank-minded, furious, hollow, he stared at her while she glared back, while ice and snow fell on the glowing ember that he had only just realized burned inside him. He had to get out--get away!--before he exploded, before he did something for which they'd probably throw him into space naked.

"Yes, Your Glory," he ground out, savage and gleeful at the look that came to her. "Anything you say, Your Glory. I'll just collect my filthy pay and go! Goodbye!"

* *

He hadn't waited to see her reaction to his angry words, had gone directly to Rieekan. Unfortunately, the civilian leaders of the Alliance had requested time to 'free' the credits and supplies with which to meet this expense, a reminder he didn't need of the real strain the payment would cause them. And so he had volunteered to go out with Luke to set the guidance markers--anything to stay out of her sight, away from her presence. By the time Solo returned to the base, the goods and credit should be on board the freighter, and Chewie would have finished repairing the damage done to the Falcon during that scrambling flight from Yavin. And Han had planned to leave without saying goodbye again to anybody.

But now he remembered that gentle touch on his arm, the hope that had seemed to shine in her eyes. And he remembered the look she had given the rest of the people in the room, a shy questioning that sought their approval at the same time it wished they had not seen. Not for the first time he realized how hard it must be to be a princess and responsible; and suddenly he knew where her anger had come from. It couldn't be easy to love someone who was less than acceptable in terms of royalty and all the crazy ideas they could have.

Love. . .

He inhaled sharply, coughed and moved away from the tauntaun. If she loved. . . would she expect him to settle down, become responsible? He grinned reluctantly. Chewie would probably like that. Luke. . . a chill touched Solo's spine.

"Echo Three to Echo Seven. Han, old buddy, do you read me?"

He started as the communicator sewn into the wide cuff of his borrowed gloves crackled to life. He lifted it toward his mouth in spite of a strange reluctance to talk to the younger man. "Loud and

clear, kid. What's up?"

"I've finished my circle, and I haven't picked up any life readings."

Only half listening, Han grinned. He could have told the kid that without using sensors. "There isn't enough life on this ice cube to fill a space cruiser. My markers are placed. I'm heading back to the base."

"There's a meteorite hit the ground near here. I want to check it out."

The communicator crackled again as the link was cut, and Han frowned. There wasn't much meteor activity in this system. The odds against one of the tiny number of humans on the planet actually seeing one fall were. . . well sufficient to warrant an investigation.

Abruptly, he shrugged off the uneasiness. "Odds! I'm beginning to think like a damfool droid!"

But having freed his thoughts from one concern, the former returned with added force. Just before Luke's call, Solo had heard. . . remembered. . . imagined an echo from long ago. Luke. . . Leia. . . ? No, it was his own voice.

"I ain't in this for your rebellion, sister, and I ain't in it for you. I'm in it for the money!"

And on the Millennium Falcon that first day they had met--as in the medicenter on Hoth just a few hours ago, her disappointment had hardened her gaze and brought furious, cutting words from her. Solo tried to close his mind, but the train of memory continued inexorably.

"If money's what you want, then that's what you'll receive!" Moments later, as she passed Luke in the cockpit hatch, she said to him, "Some friend you've got there. I wonder if he cares for anything. . . or anybody."

"I care!" The farm kid settled into the pilot's chair in the Falcon's cockpit. "So, what do you think of her?"

"I'm trying not to, kid." Han stared blindly at streaking stars outside the pressure port, holding himself very still in the hope that the ancient wounds opened by her words would recede once more and leave him only scarred, not in pain. He and Chewie would just collect their money and leave.

"Good."

He looked at Skywalker--so earnest, so believing--and remembered other youngsters he had known. They all needed a little shaking up now and then. And someone had once said humor could heal the heart.

He glanced over his shoulder to make sure she had gone. "Still, she's got a lot of spunk. I don't know. D'you think a princess and a guy like me--?"



@ky 1/83

"No!"

Luke's response had been swift and with its youthful challenge had brought a smile to Han then. Now it rang hollowly in his heart.

Shivering again, he stamped his feet to warm up muscles that had become chilled while he day-dreamed. He gathered up the reins and swung into the saddle easily, urging the tauntaun into its loping gait toward the base and Leia.

Challenge. Luke's words might have been hers. A guy whose sole motivation was money would never get very far with a princess who had lost home, family, world to a chosen cause. And that was why she had avoided Han for so long. He jerked on the reins and then leaned forward to pat Bela in apology.

But while Leia was keeping away from a stubborn--stupid--Corellian smuggler, had she found greater worth in a farmboy from Tatooine? Closer to her own age, a willing fighter who believed as she did, who--handicapped by a complete absence of instruction or guidance--struggled every day to learn the mystical use of the Force of a Jedi, such a youngster might seem just the right thing to a princess.

"But I've changed!" The wind blew the words back into his face, and he could almost see her look of disbelief, hear the skepticism of her 'how?'

His breath came rapidly, too rapidly, freezing his lungs, and he pressed a hand to the woven scarf covering mouth and nose as he struggled to control himself and the fear. But there was no going back. He, of all, should know. From the nightmares Chewie and Malla had comforted away on Kashykk; from the terror and despairing effort of surviving the Mant--and his escape; from the horrors of the organization which had taught him that no man or woman had a right to unquestioned obedience; from the years of wandering that had led to the Death Star; he had always learned there could be no return to what had been--be it innocence or security or anonymity or the laughter of disbelief. There was always a tomorrow and tomorrow was always different. He had

already proclaimed aloud the change within him. No amount of protest could alter the fact.

He still needed the money to pay Jabba. But with Jabba on his back, he was a danger to the rebellion anyhow.

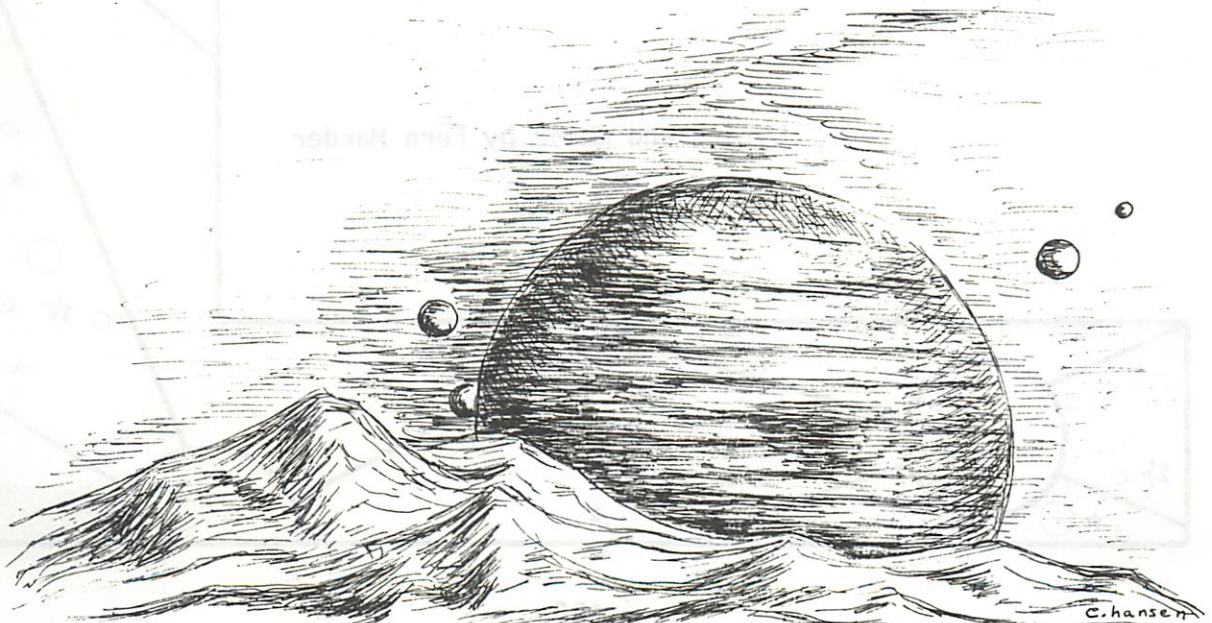
So, first he had to tell Rieekan he was going. It had been a long time since Solo had reported his whereabouts or intentions to anyone but Chewie, and he didn't really have to now. But courtesy was due the man if not the officer. And somewhere on the base, a princess might want to say goodbye. He would have his answer, then, by what she said--how she said it.

If she wanted him to come back, she would tell him. . . somehow. Leia was always pretty straightforward with everybody else. It was only with him that she sometimes hedged. If she gave him a chance, he would have to pay close attention and not let her back down. And perhaps that elusive woman would shine within her for him. . . now.

Because now he could answer her. Now he cared for something and someone. And he knew what he wanted.

He looked up and spotted the wide black opening to the ice hangar. Straightforward? From the first she had told him what she wanted, and all the time he had tried to approach her, he had been running from the knowledge. He still couldn't be a wide-eyed believer like Luke. Or worship her. . . like Luke. But if Leia Organa somehow--possibly--could love Han Solo, he could see himself fighting for her, like Luke, risking all for her. Risking all. . . .

The wind had picked up, blowing across the dunes and valleys of ice with all the gentle caress of a well-honed knife blade, and heavy snow clouds pressed in from a blue-gray sky. Suddenly grateful for the safety and relative warmth imparted by the massive storm doors that enclosed the base, Han spurred his mount forward. Tonight would be another bad one, a real bad one; and anyone with sense would do well not to be caught outside in the frozen dark. ❄



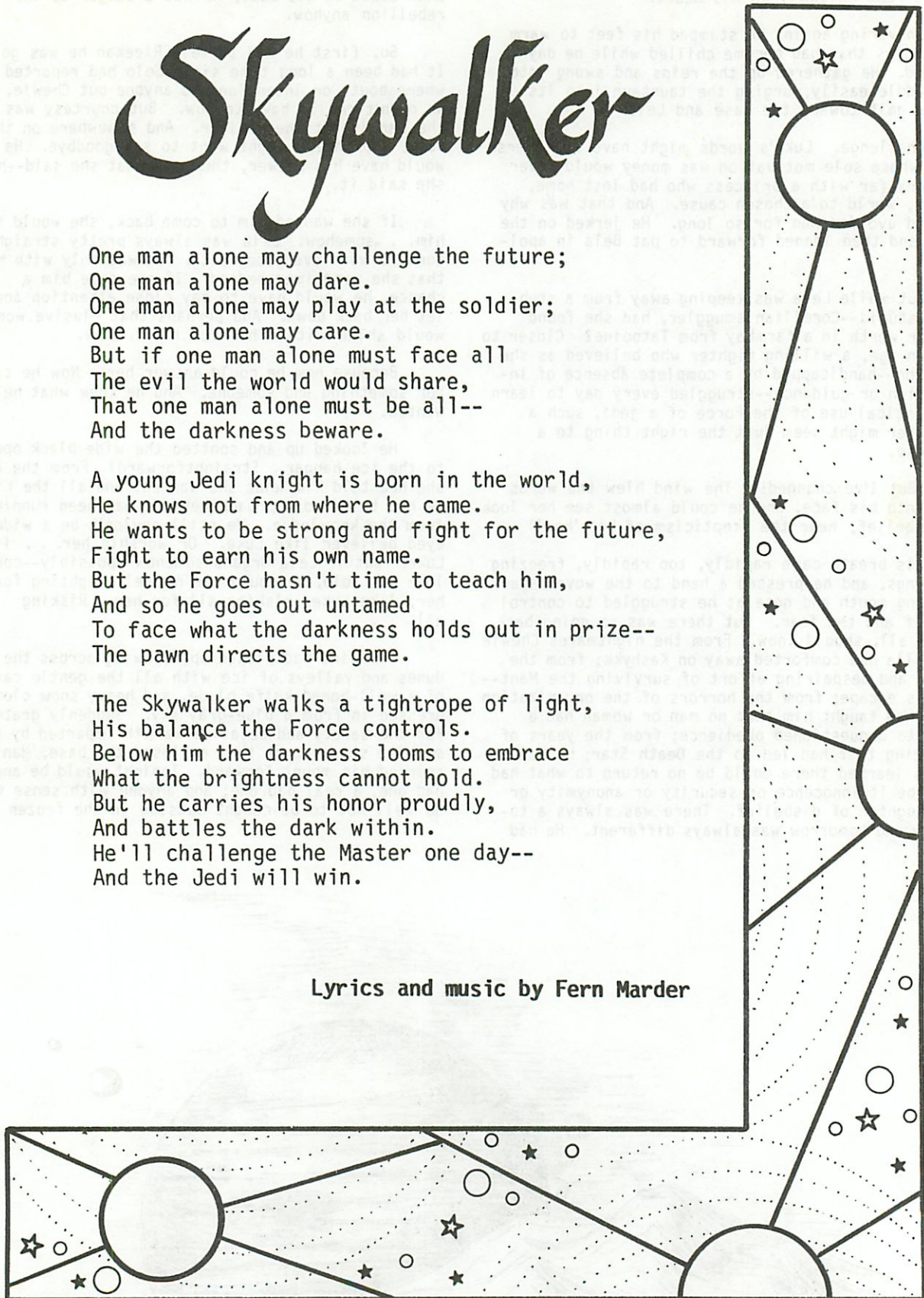
Skywalker

One man alone may challenge the future;
One man alone may dare.
One man alone may play at the soldier;
One man alone may care.
But if one man alone must face all
The evil the world would share,
That one man alone must be all--
And the darkness beware.

A young Jedi knight is born in the world,
He knows not from where he came.
He wants to be strong and fight for the future,
Fight to earn his own name.
But the Force hasn't time to teach him,
And so he goes out untamed
To face what the darkness holds out in prize--
The pawn directs the game.

The Skywalker walks a tightrope of light,
His balance the Force controls.
Below him the darkness looms to embrace
What the brightness cannot hold.
But he carries his honor proudly,
And battles the dark within.
He'll challenge the Master one day--
And the Jedi will win.

Lyrics and music by Fern Marder



THE LAST WORD

And here we thought we'd gotten out of this business... Sigh. Funny place to find a Marder/Walske editorial, eh what? Actually, this isn't such a bad spot. As Dr. McCoy pointed out, it's nice to get the last word--especially in someone else's zine--for a change.

A funny thing happened on the way to the mimeo...we took a left turn into offsetspace. What do you expect after volunteering to type 'a couple of stories' into the computer and ending up with the zine that ate Manhattan? For those who aren't up on reduction and printing conventions, this roughly 400-page two-volume set represents 900 pages of manuscript copy. That's a lot of typing, folks. It's also a lot of glorious zine.

The poor souls around New York who lived through this thing with Anne and us have heard a lot of griping, especially as May crept up on us on little soggy feet (New York was deluged in March and April). But, for the record, we got into this thing because we believed in it. We still do. Lucky reader who has picked this up and is reading this page right now, you've got quite a zine in your hands. (We can say that because it isn't ours. We just work here.) This zine needed time to grow, to mature. And this zine needed to come out. We are very pleased to have been a part of making that happen.

No, this wasn't easy. On any of those involved. We gave Anne a much harder time as staff than we did as writers she had to edit--we were much more hospitable to editorial changes in our own works than we were to layout and copy changes in the other material we were handling. Will we ever again

be able to leave a message for Anne to please call us back without having that returned call begin with a half frantic, "what's wrong?" We lived, breathed, dreamt, ate, and cursed TIME WARP for about six months. And, to one extent or another, so did everyone we came into contact with (oh, darn the dangling preposition anyway!). For better or worse. To those who shared the experience, thanks for the support. You're holding the best thank-you present we can think of...

The whole thing really went 'boom' that Tuesday (?) we first realized that we (a) needed to and (b) might actually be able to go offset. Fern spent the whole day on the phone back and forth with Anne and Steve, our old printer for Nu Ormenel and Dagger of the Mind. That's her job. Making all the arrangements and phone calls and photocopies and other such like. After all, Carol typed almost the entire zine herself (yes, all 900 pages of crud, er, scintillating prose). Carol would later have to help 'offsetize' an 'electrostencil-ready' zine while Fern made all the drop runs to the printer, who, needless to say, was in our neighborhood, not Anne's.

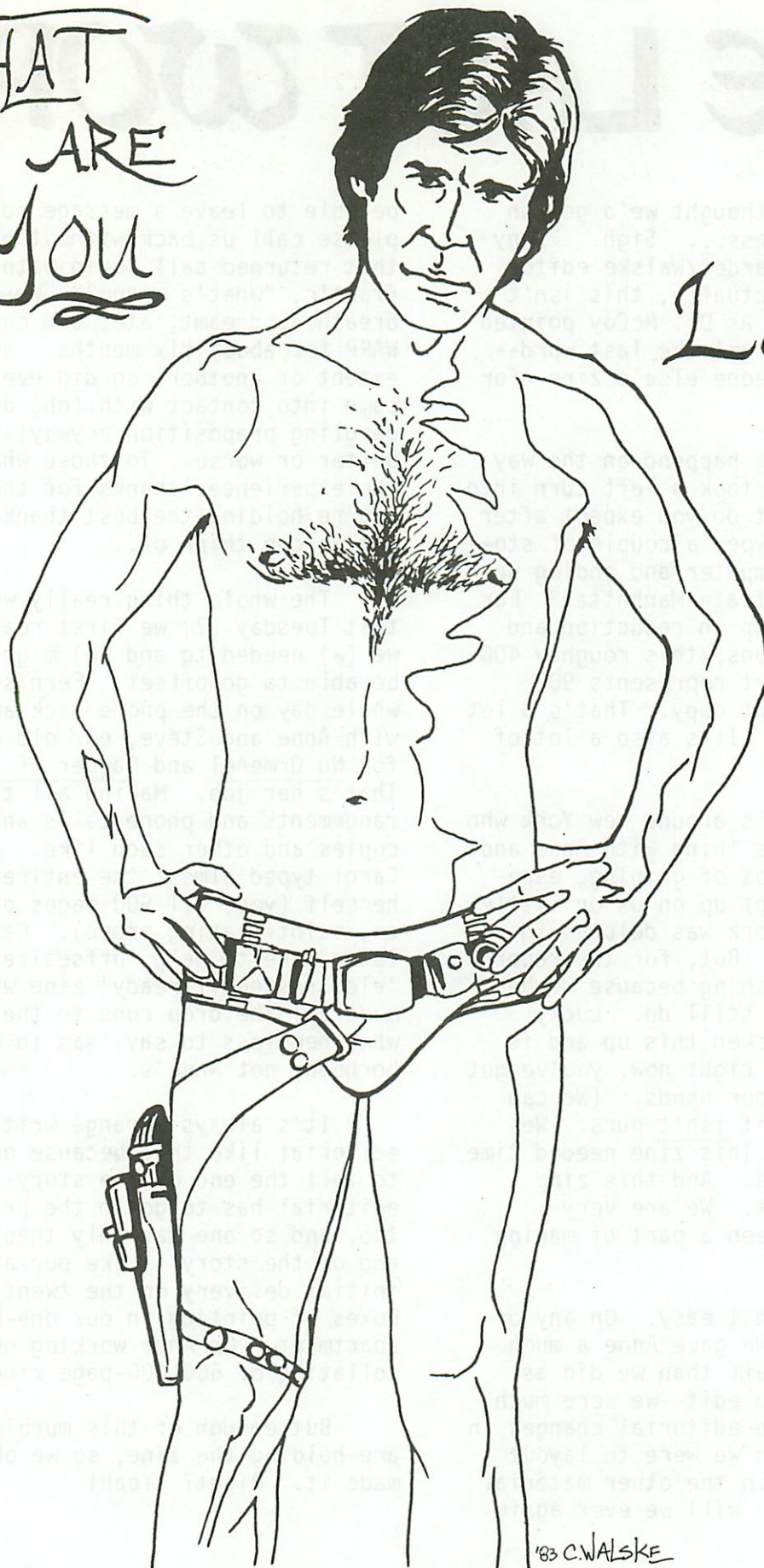
It's always strange writing an editorial like this because one wants to tell the end of the story--but the editorial has to go to the printer, too, and so one can only theorize the end of the story. Like our accepting initial delivery on the twenty-five boxes of printing in our one-bedroom apartment. Or Anne working out the collating of 600 400-page zines.

But enough of this murbling. You are holding the zine, so we obviously made it. Right? Yeah!

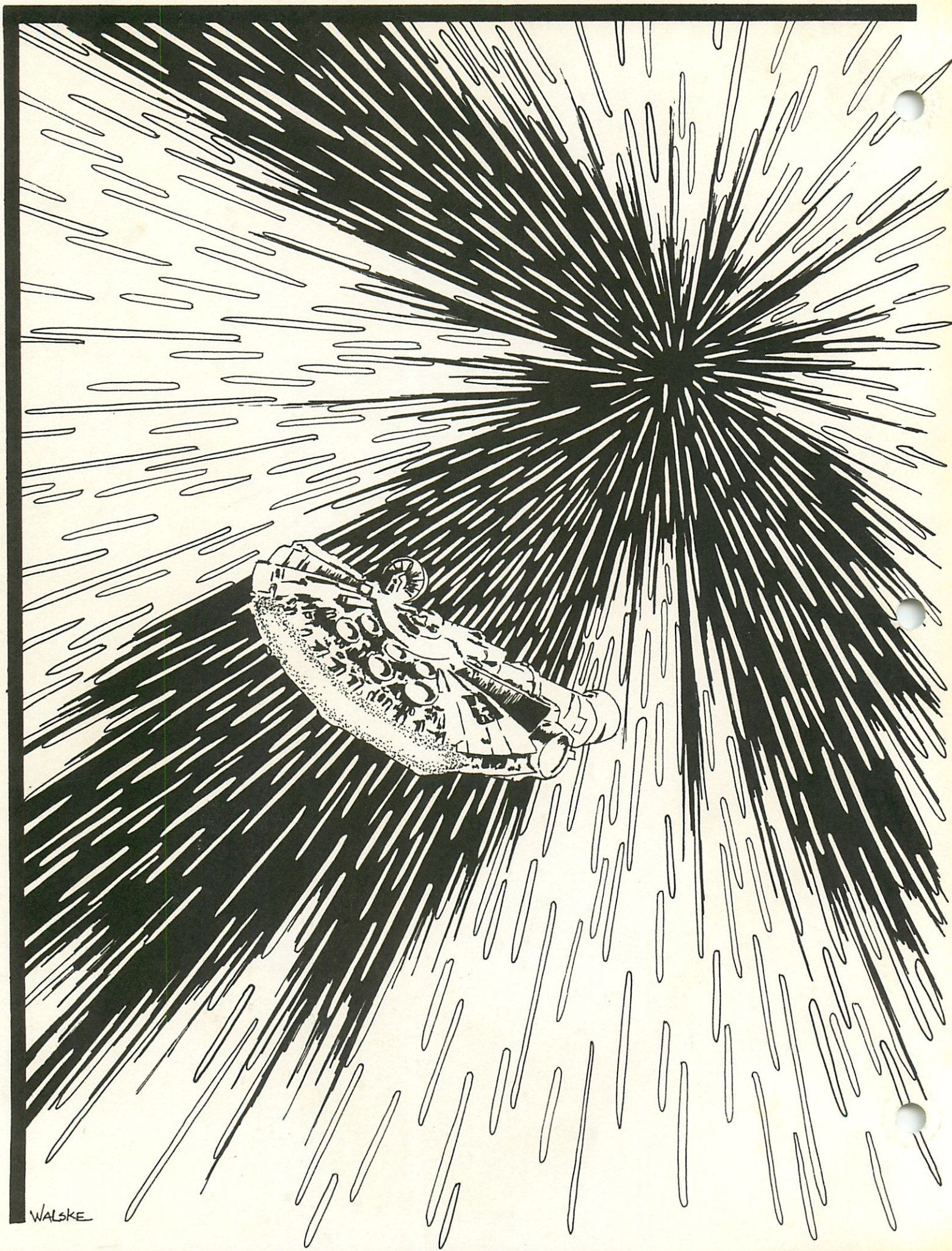
Fern Marder and Carol Walske

WHAT
ARE
YOU

LOOKING
AT?



'83 C. WALSKE



WALSKE